
The future of electronic entertainment issue#140
www.edge-online.com
EDGE®
PLAYSTATION2 I XBOX I GAME
Previewed: GTA: San An
World Of Warcraft, Burn
Reviewed: Sudeki, Front
Gradius V, Chronicles Of
Interviewed: Epic on Un
and the future of PC act
Plus: Treasure – from Meg
Gunstar Heroes to Guard
Heroes on Game Boy Adv
Metroid Prime 2
On the trail of Samus Aran's journey into the dark world


AUTO
ENERGY 01





Following the appearance of *Tekken 5* and *Resident Evil 4* on previous covers of **Edge**, placing *Metroid Prime 2*, another sequel, on page one of this month's issue will probably be a source of consternation to some.

There is, in part, a practical consideration behind the decision: just as sequels increasingly dominate the charts, so they head up gamers' concerns. But there is a related issue: sequels are actually driving games forward.

As videogaming reaches wider audiences, the traits of other entertainment mediums are permeating it. Attracting attention to a new title is now as important as the business of creating quality games.

In Hollywood, big-name stars serve to bring audiences to cinemas. Another common solution is to turn an existing book into a movie. Without Matt Damon, Kiera Knightley or John Grisham, videogame publishers are attempting to back up big-budget projects with either licences (*Spider-Man 2*) or the values of an established series (*Final Fantasy*). And it's surely preferable that games draw on their forebears for kudos rather than relying on the successes of other industries.

There will always be fresh titles, of course, and we'll be here to champion them, but increasingly publishers see them as loss leaders – the real money lies in the follow-up. There will always be poor-quality sequels, too. But the best developers treat their progeny as their crown jewels. Nintendo, SquareSoft, id Software, Bungie and Rockstar know that their games' names are worth literally millions. Reputations can be ruined overnight.

It's better that millions of pounds are spent adding gameplay to *GTA* or *Metroid Prime* than on buying an identity from the makers of Troy or I, Robot. And it's better that a great sequel fixes the problems of the first game – and pays for its development – than if neither game were made at all.

Does any of this seem familiar? It should – those words are almost exactly the same as the ones that made up the editorial intro to issue 63 of **Edge**, nearly six years ago. Sequels, you see – you just can't avoid them.



Features















Future Publishing Ltd is part of The Future Network plc. The Future Network produces carefully targeted specialist magazines for people who share a passion. We aim to satisfy that passion by creating titles offering value for money, reliable information, smart buying advice and which are a pleasure to read. Today we publish more than 100 magazines in the UK, US, France and Italy. Over 100 international editions of our magazines are also published in 30 other countries across the world.

The Future Network plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FNET).

Non-executive Chairman: Roger Parry
Chief Executive: Greg Ingham
Group Finance Director: John Bowman
Tel +44 1225 442244

www.thefuturenetwork.plc.uk





Bath London Milan New York Paris San Francisco



Printed in the UK

© Future Publishing 2003



ABC 27,315
January-June 2003
(Audit Bureau of Circulation)

Editorial
Future Publishing 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW
Telephone +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax +44 (0)1225 732275
Email edge@futurenet.co.uk
Edge website www.edge-online.com

People on Edge
Tony Mott editor
Darren Phillips art editor
Margaret Robertson games editor
Ian Evenden production editor
Andrew Hind deputy art editor
Ben Schroder staff writer
Christophe Kagotani Tokyo bureau
Ste Curran editor-at-large

Contributors
Nick Aspell, Steven Bailey, Mr Biffo, João Diniz-Sanches, Kieron Gillen, Jon Jordan, Andrew Lowe, Toshihiro Nagoshi, Steven Poole, James Price, RedEye, Sam Richards, Keith Stuart, Mark Walbank, John Walker, Oliver Welsh

Production
Kirsty Bell senior production coordinator
Rose Griffiths production manager
Colin Polis commercial buyer

Circulation
Russell Hughes trade marketing manager
Duncan Shearer group circulation manager

Advertising
Jayne Caple advertising director
Clare Williamson head of sales
Darren Gratton advertising manager
Scott Longstaff group account manager
Graeme Kirk recruitment advertising
Ben Pearson and **Chris Thom** classified
Advertising phone 01225 442244

Publishing
Matthew Pierce assistant publisher
Tamara Longden promotions manager
Simon Wear international licensing director
Robert Price group publishing director

Subscriptions & distribution
Future Publishing Ltd
FREEPOST BS4900, Somerton TA11 7BR
Telephone 01458 271184
Fax 01458 271146
Email games.subs@futurenet.co.uk
Distributed by **Marketforce (UK) Ltd**, 5th Floo
Building, Kings Reach Tower, Stamford Street,

Senior management
Roger Parry non-executive chairman
Greg Ingham chief executive
John Bowman group finance director

directory september

the 'have morph fun' issue





















Prescreen

Regulars



Testscreen

Production of Edge
Hardware: Power Macintosh G3, G4, G5
Software: QuarkXPress, Adobe Photoshop, Macromedia FreeHand, and Microsoft Office **Typography:** (Adobe®) Helvetica Ultra Light, Thin, Light, Roman, **Medium**, **Bold**

Printed in the UK by Southernprint, Poole, Dorset

Future Games: the first choice for gamers
Edge is brought to you by Future Publishing Ltd, the makers of PC Gamer, GamesMaster, PlayStation2 Official Magazine-UK, PlayStation World, NGC, PSM2

Edge recognises all copyrights in this issue. Where possible, we have acknowledged the copyright holder. Contact us if we have failed to credit your copyright and we will be happy to correct any oversight.

"No, I won't hurt her. I'll blow her head off!"

Edge is the registered trade mark of EDGE Interactive Media Inc. Used under licence



Big three press on with next-gen race

Microsoft's CEO talks of beating its main console rival, while Sony signs more to PSP and Nintendo overhauls its dual-screen handheld design

Development of the next generation of gaming hardware is continuing apace, with Sony pledging to show its next home platform at 2005's E3 and Microsoft claiming that it'll beat the Japanese market leader next time around. On the topic of Xbox, Microsoft CEO **Steve Ballmer** recently said: "We may still be losing money, but we have gone from nowhere to a significant player with a whole different approach. We've generated something brand new. I'm betting we can take Sony in the next generation."

However, his technology staff may have to pick up the pace if Xbox's successor is to reach the market before PS3, something that has repeatedly been stated as a goal. Consider the words of one developer, who did not wish to be named, currently working on software for Microsoft's next console: "Xbox2 is still very basic at the moment – ironically running on G5 Macs but at a snail's pace. There won't be any proper beta kits until next year, so it's very awkward getting anything actually finished on it. The graphics we're working with are a bit more hi-res, and there's more power to do spangly effects, but it's the same old game…"

In July, Sony chief **Ken Kutaragi** attempted to allay negative chatter that has emerged surrounding his company's next machine, stating: "There has been some talk that development is not going well, but we expect to have a playable version [of the next console] at E3. We are pushing ahead with that schedule in mind."

The company plans to push its initial PS3 software range at next year's Tokyo Game Show, release alpha dev kits to game studios in the first half of 2005, and get the finished hardware into Japanese stores for the end of the same year.

Much speculation currently surrounds the introduction of new home gaming hardware. Some observers claim that it's happening too quickly, although it's worth noting that Sony intends to maintain PlayStation2 as a viable market proposition for "at least another six years," according to a source close to the company.

Handheld developments

In the portable hardware space, meanwhile, Sony has announced 25 new publishers for PSP, including Atari, Eidos and Ubisoft, along with Japanese companies X-Nauts, Arika and D3. New PSP titles also confirmed include *Burnout*, *Ghost In The Shell: Stand Alone Complex*, a new *Harvest Moon* title, rhythm-action game *Technic Cute* (from Arika), puzzler *Mojipittan* (Namco), *Transformers* (Atari/Melbourne House), and a new *Pro Evo* from Konami.

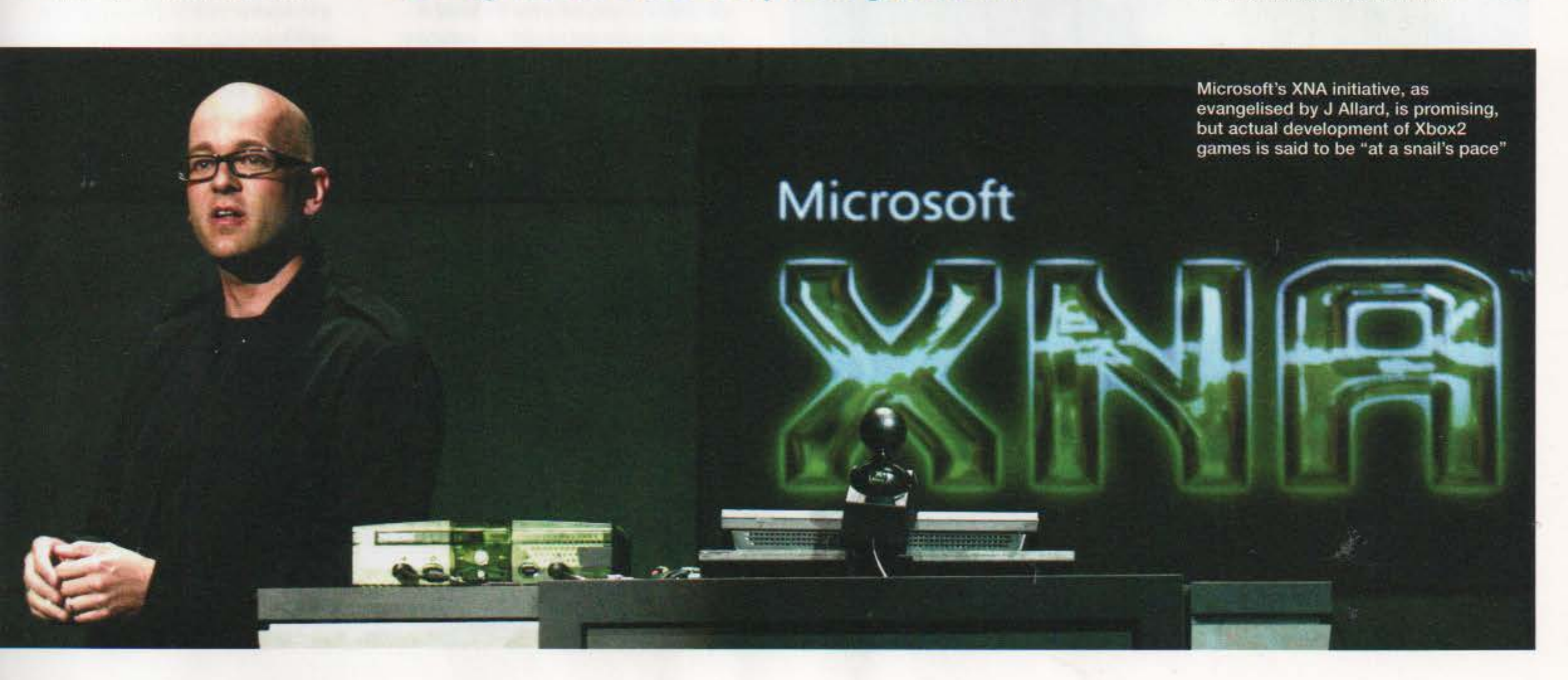
Sony has also confirmed that PSP will offer support for 16-player wireless connectivity (although it's not yet known which games will be compatible), with the opportunity to link up with PlayStation2 hardware via USB ports.

Finally, a source has revealed that Nintendo's upcoming DS has been quite significantly overhauled in light of the positive reaction to Sony's PSP. The finished design is reported to be considerably sleeker and more refined than the slightly basic-looking silver-coloured demo units seen at its official unveiling during E3 in May.



Nintendo's DS is retaining the functionality offered by demo units at E3, but the console's design has been revamped in the wake of unanimously glowing reports for Sony's PSP

"We have gone from nowhere to a significant player with a whole different approach. I am betting we can take Sony next generation"



Microsoft's XNA initiative, as evangelised by J Allard, is promising, but actual development of Xbox2 games is said to be "at a snail's pace"

Game Stars prepares to go Live

Having been deemed a success following its two TV outings, ITV's gaming event is gearing up for a September spectacular

Taking place from September 1-5 at London's Docklands-based ExCeL exhibition centre, Game Stars Live is a multiformat gaming event aimed at consumers. Reflecting the tone of the Game Stars television show, the event gives some of the industry's major publishers a chance to showcase their Christmas line-up alongside a variety of entertainment acts from the world of music and sport.

As **Edge** goes to press, confirmed exhibitors include Activision, Atari, Eidos, Electronic Arts, Konami, Microsoft, Nintendo, Nokia and Ubisoft, with more announcements to be made in the run up to the event. Already a number of exclusives (see boxout) have been confirmed, including the first public unveiling of *Pro Evolution Soccer 4*, which will be playable within the Bear Pit area (gladiator-style arenas designed to pit attendees against each other in the search for the best Game Stars Live player), with a special tournament running throughout the show.

Other areas of the event include Virtual Vs Reality in which players are able to compare their football, basketball and extreme sports gaming scores against their real-life equivalent, as well as a variety of sporting celebrities, while The Groove Zone showcases the latest rhythm and karaoke action. The main stage will host continuous companies, recruitment agencies and universities will be on hand to discuss your potential future. Finally, Game Stars Live will host the final of the European Online Gaming Championships, the continent's biggest PC gaming tournament following three months of qualification rounds.

The exhibition is the result of the collaboration between Game Stars brand owner Granada Enterprises, licensee London Event Company (which has organised the event) and ELSPA, but will benefit from additional support from a selection of media partners, GAME and ITV – Granada is commissioning a specific Game Stars Live programme to be



The ExCeL centre is set alongside Victoria Dock and offers 65,000 square feet of space in its show hall. If you make it along in September you might even meet the Edge team

Exhibitors include Activision, Atari, Eidos, EA, Konami, Microsoft, Nintendo, Nokia and Ubisoft, with more announcements to be made

entertainment in the form of competitions, giveaways, live bands and DJs as well as broadcasts from ITV, Capital FM and XFM, while The Cheat Zone will provide solutions to those with gaming troubles.

If it all gets too much you can always retire to The Retro Lounge where Joystick Junkies, in partnership with **Edge**, give you the chance to step back into the world of classic tabletops and uprights of yesteryear. If you'd rather be making games than playing them, head over to the Get Into Gaming section (also **Edge**-supported) where in addition to a series of seminars, professional career advisors as well as representatives from leading gaming broadcast soon after the show, thus complementing the usual Easter Game Stars transmission.

Tickets for Game Stars Live are now on sale from the event's website (www.gamestarslive.co.uk), priced £10. Alternatively, they'll be £12 on the door.

We'll report on further announcements and developments in the run up to the exhibition which, if the popularity of Sony's past PlayStation2 Experience events is any indication, should prove a successful enterprise. Besides, given the extent of videogaming in the UK a consumer show to cater for this sizeable community can't have come soon enough.

London Games Week: the details

The beginning of September sees the return of London Games Week, a five-day extravaganza dedicated to the videogame industry, with a natural European focus.

This year, a remarkable situation has developed with established trade and developer events, respectively ECTS and GDCE, coming under attack from newcomers EGN and EDF (and, by association, the consumer-focused Game Stars Live). Time will tell whether the continent is big enough for all of them.

Here are the details for each event scheduled to take place during the UK industry's busy period:



ECTS
When: September 1–3
Where: Earls Court
www.ects.com

Organised by CMP (as with GDCE, see below), ECTS is Europe's major long-running annual trade show. Or at least, it used to be. Recent years have seen a noticeable decrease in exhibitor attendance and this year's is the slimmest yet, with hardly any of the major game publishers showing up.

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE EUROPE (GDCE)
When: August 31– September 3
Where: Earls Court
www.gdceurope.com

Now in its fourth year, GDCE runs alongside ECTS and is dedicated to the European development community. The main conference programme offers 35 sessions and keynote speakers include, amongst others, Creative Assembly's Tim Ansell, David Cage from Quantic Dream and Peter Molyneux of Lionhead.

GAME STARS LIVE
When: September 1–5
Where: ExCeL
www.gamestarslive.co.uk
See above.









BioWare's Ray Muzyka and Warren Spector from Ion Storm will speak at the EDF, which features two days of development-related issues and a day dedicated to mobile games

And there's more…

The ExCeL centre will also play host to a new game developer conference in September. Featuring keynote addresses by Warren Spector of Ion Storm and Ray Muzyka of BioWare, the European Developers' Forum will be "about the people involved in game development in Europe, about the technology and about business developments in the global games development sector," according to **Ian Baverstock**, chairman of TIGA, the independent games developers' association, which is organising the conference. Other highlights are Tameem Antoniades from Just Add Monsters sharing his experience of development for the next generation of consoles and Jim Blackhurst from Hailstorm discussing how mobile developers can get round the problem of porting games to different handsets.

The conference runs from September 1-3, and more details can be found at www.europeandevelopersforum.co.uk





Splinter Cell 3 will be among the games that have been confirmed at Game Stars Live. All home consoles, PCs, handheld platforms and mobile phone games will be represented

EUROPEAN GAMES NETWORK (EGN)
When: September 1-3
Where: ExCeL
www.europeangamesnetwork.co.uk

Owned by ELSPA, this is a three-day trade-only show running alongside the public-friendly Game Stars Live and developer-focused EDF (see below) which has emerged as a considerable rival to ECTS. Unlike CMP's event, however, EGN's list of exhibitors is extensive, with both major and minor industry players in attendance.

EUROPEAN DEVELOPERS' FORUM (EDF)
When: September 1-3
Where: ExCeL
www.europeandevelopersforum.co.uk

Rival to GDCE, EDF is a TIGA event created for Europe's developer fraternity as a result of the organiser's claims that too many people were dissatisfied with CMP's equivalent event. The advantage of completing the consumer, trade and developer package offered at ExCeL this year (and free entrance from one event to another) should not be underestimated.

Game Stars Live titles confirmed to date

MICROSOFT
Halo 2 (exclusive)

ACTIVISION
Tony Hawk's Underground 2
Rome: Total War
X-Men Legends
Spider-Man 2
Call Of Duty: Finest Hour
Shark Tale
SW: Battlefront (exclusive)

KONAMI
Pro Evo Soccer 4 (exclusive)
Dancing Stage Fusion
Karaoke Stage
Duel Masters: Sempai Legends
DragonBall Z: Budokai 3
King of Fighters
Colin McRae Rally 2005

ATARI
Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone
Rollercoaster Tycoon 3
Sid Meier's Pirates! (exclusive)
Shadow Ops: Red Mercury
Axis And Allies
Transformers
Driver 3
Terminator 3: The Redemption

NOKIA
Pocket Kingdoms
Pathway To Glory
Elder Scrolls Travels: Shadowkey
Requiem Of Hell
SSX: Out Of Bounds
Call of Duty

UBISOFT
Brothers in Arms
Splinter Cell 3
Prince Of Persia 2 (worldwide exclusive)
Ghost Recon 2
Rocky Legends
Playboy: The Mansion
Star Ocean 3







SNK strikes back in the UK

Ambitious publisher Ignition signs deal with SNK Playmore to release console titles across Europe









It's surprising – and absolutely necessary – how faithful *Maximum Impact*'s visuals are to the series' 2D roots, down to signature moves and, in Mai's case, signature movements

They're always bemoaning how poorly they're treated, but the permanent pouts of self-proclaimed hardcore gamers across Europe could well have turned into begrudging grins on the afternoon of Thursday July 8, when the news broke that Ignition Entertainment has signed an agreement to publish SNK's portfolio of console titles throughout Europe. Beginning in October with *Metal Slug Advance* on GBA and *Metal Slug 3* on Xbox, the titles will draw from SNK's vast library of respected IP; games based on *King Of Fighters* and *Samurai Shodown* will arrive before early 2005, and the resurrection of more classic brands is anticipated.

It's a move likely to delight many. "SNK games have always proved very popular with gamers," claimed **Vijay Chadha**, Ignition's managing director. "We're committed to working with SNK to officially bring their titles to all PAL territories. We're all massive fans of SNK titles here at Ignition, and are very much looking forward to bringing the SNK brand back to Europe." If that wasn't already evident enough from the enthusiastic press release, it certainly was from the Ignition staff's fluctuations between rapture and happiness at the launch day in Knightsbridge, where a number of western journalists gathered to sample a few of the upcoming titles.

Taking pride of place on a large plasma screen was *King Of Fighters: Maximum Impact*, a PlayStation2 fighting game which takes SNK's ten-year-old fighting brand and moves it into three dimensions for the first time. The move is successful, visually at least, although the swathes of bright colour, simple frames and exaggerated characterisation that reinterpret SNK's visual motif will certainly suffer in direct comparison to modern 3D beat 'em ups like *Soul Calibur 2* or *Tekken 4*. It's a pretty game, but by no means a beautiful one, and only lengthy playtesting will reveal whether the game mechanic stands up to the significant weight of its heritage.

Elsewhere, playable versions of *Metal Slug 3* and *SNK Vs Capcom Chaos* were much easier to get to grips with. *Metal Slug* is as it always was: bright, fast and stupidly furious, a tribute to both the personality and longevity of sprite-based software. The Xbox version has Live compatibility, and we hope that will allow for cooperative online play, although even a simple arcade-style scoreboard will play to the game's nature. *SNK Vs Capcom Chaos* is SNK's response to Capcom's *Capcom Vs SNK*, or to put it without the tongue twister, *King Of Fighters* ft. Ryu And Friends. While the sprite resolution appears to be the same as the two companies have been using for a decade, the animation may be smoother, and the game will certainly suit those who favoured Terry and Ryo over Ken and Ryu.

The problem, though, is finding the audience. Chadha says that buyers from major retail chains have been eagerly anticipating *Metal Slug* for some time, but that has to be tempered with assumptions that buyers' tastes run toward the hobbyist end of the market anyway, and a good buyer knows better than to buy for himself. SNK fans will have long found themselves resorting to import; Ignition's market must come from persuading the mainstream that there's entertainment in classic franchises. It won't be easy, but few **Edge** readers will see the return of the hardware and software legend to these shores as a bad thing, particularly as it once seemed it would be gone for good.

Maximum Impact is a pretty game, but by no means a beautiful one, and only lengthy testing will reveal whether it stands up to its heritage







SCEE shows off autumn collection

Two non-gaming applications point towards different paths for PS2



DJ: Decks & FX displays some clever coding as well as a creditable attempt at simulating vinyl mixing with a CD player

Scheduled as part of the replacement for its PlayStation Experience, SCEUK's July Software Day saw a handful of its producers showing off their games to a gathering of UK journalists. *Jak & Daxter 3*, *Sly Cooper 2*, *Crisis Zone* and Namco's scrolling analogue stick-based beat 'em up *Death By Degrees* all drew interest, but the day was really about two upcoming products that could barely be considered games at all. *EyeToy: Chat* and *DJ: Decks & FX* are Sony's boldest moves yet towards establishing the PlayStation brand as a living room hub, not just a console.

EyeToy: Chat is London Studio's take on video conferencing, allowing users in possession of a broadband adapter to communicate using the camera. Launching this year in Europe (a currently unconfirmed Japanese and US release will presumably follow), it permits both realtime person-to-person chat, participation in (Sony-sanctioned) chatrooms, and video mailing. All data is stored on the server, removing the need for memory cards and allowing Sony to view video mails in case of a dispute. Moderators will patrol the service round the clock, a not-inexpensive means of keeping the Daily Mail at bay.

The emphasis throughout the *Chat* presentation, stressed time and time again, was on security. Everything in the package – video chat, audio chat, chatroom access – defaults to being locked, essentially rendering the game inert until a passcode is entered. The passcode is in the manual, the theory being that parents control which parts of *Chat* they're comfortable with their children accessing. In practice, of course, there's no guarantee the manual will reach the parents, particularly since many legally responsible adults still regard videogames as a harmless, childish pursuit. The logic is sound, at least insofar as it's difficult to imagine what else Sony could have done, short of watching over every child's shoulder. In its singular concession to the PS2's position as a gaming machine, *EyeToy: Chat* has three – draughts, chess, and battleships – built in.

DJ: Decks & FX, essentially DJ simulation software, has no elements of gameplay at all. Which isn't to say the thing isn't interactive, just that there's nothing for the player to achieve other than a sense of aural satisfaction. The interface mocks up two turntables, a sampler and an FX box, and provides players with a raft of modern house records to play and mix between. That alone demonstrates a considerable technological victory, given it's all running from one CD and one CD player. The smart design is in the way the system operates, allowing even the most incompetent DJ to mix between songs seamlessly. The system will operate on its own, and as such it's perfect for parties; DJs can dip in and out without (necessarily) disrupting the music.

The important thing to stress is that this isn't a music game, not even something like Music 2000. It's a living room object quite unlike anything released on PS2 before, and while its boxed-in limitations mean that at the moment it still errs on the side of adult toy rather than music system, it's easy to envisage future versions taking advantage of hard disk and online capabilities, and proving a capable addition to (or even, ultimately, a replacement for) users' stereo systems. For now, though, the company will be content with the slight shift in emphasis on its market-leading console; it doesn't expect *DJ* to sell in great numbers, but the effect it has on the machine's future could be immeasurably valuable.

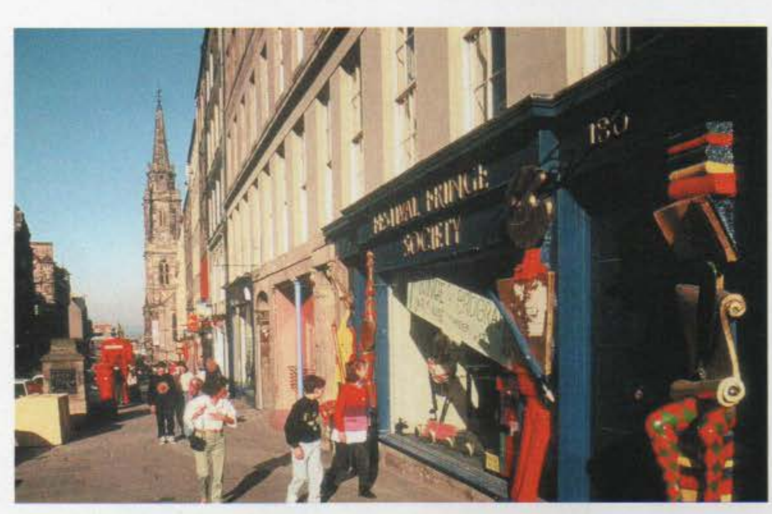




EyeToy: Chat may be a groundbreaking application for a home console, but the inclusion of simple ggames such as draughts in the package strikes us as lacking excitement

Edinburgh poised for festival of gaming

There's still (just about) time to make your mark on the north's biggest gathering of videogame activity and discussion, sponsored by Edge



It's hardly as if you need another excuse to visit Edinburgh in August. The original festival is complemented by the sprawling Fringe as well as newer festivals of film and comedy

The Edinburgh International Games Festival is only a few days away, but there's still time for you to get involved. You can vote for the game you want to see win the People's Choice Award and you can pose questions to a panel of gaming experts. To cast your vote, either visit us at www.edge-online.com or follow the instructions below to vote for your favoured candidate by SMS. Voting is open until the conclusion of EIGF04 on August 22.

Send all text messages to 83130

- For *EyeToy Play*, send the words VOTE EYETOY
- For *Project Gotham Racing 2*, send the words VOTE GOTHAM
- For *Katamari Damacy*, send the words VOTE KATAMARI
- For *Manhunt*, send the words VOTE MANHUNT
- For *In Memoriam*, send the words VOTE MEMORIAM
- For *Prince Of Persia: The Sands of Time*, send the words VOTE PERSIA
- For *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow*, send the words VOTE SPLINTER
- For *Four Swords+*, send the words VOTE SWORDS
- For *Viewtiful Joe*, send the words VOTE VIEWTIFUL
- For *Made In Wario*, send the words VOTE WARIO



The EIGF will also be fielding a panel of international gaming industry experts, and has thrown the floor open to readers of **Edge**. Covering every aspect of the industry from hardware manufacture to game development and the retail environment, the panelists have a unique insight into how gaming got where it is and where it's likely to be going next.

The panel consists of: Michel Cassius, Microsoft's senior director of Xbox platform and marketing; Doug Lowenstein, president of the Entertainment Software Association; Anna de Kerckhove, COO of Inspired Broadcast Networks; Michael Logue, the MD of Gamestation; and Ian Baverstock, Kuju's business development director.

You can submit your questions by writing to **Edge** at Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW, by visiting www.edge-online.com, or by emailing us at edge@futurenet.co.uk with 'Question Time' as the subject of your email. The most searching and intriguing questions will be put to the panel during a session at the festival on August 12, and you can read their answers in a special feature in issue 142.

If you're not attending the industry events at the show, you can still go along and have a go at the latest games at the Go Play Games event and the game screenings. The playable games are on all formats, including consoles, PCs, handhelds and mobile phones, and include: *Burnout 3: Takedown*, *Rainbow Six 3: Black Arrow*, *Brothers In Arms*, *Forza Motorsport*, *The Chronicles Of Riddick*, *Outrun 2*, *Gran Turismo 4*, *Athens 2004*, *Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy*, *Wario Ware Inc*, *Four Swords+*, *Operation Shadow* and *Pathway To Glory*.

Go Play Games will be held at the Royal Museum, Chambers Street, Edinburgh, from August 8-22. Tickets for each session are £2 each and will be available from the Museum Of Scotland information desk or by telephoning 0131 247 4422.

Another way to find out about the latest games comes in the form of the Game Screenings, which take place at The Odeon, 118 Lothian Road, Edinburgh, with a companion gameplaying event at the Odeon in Glasgow on Thursday August 12. Entry is £4.

The schedule for the festival's two days of events runs thus:



The Incredibles is the new film by Pixar about a bickering family of superheroes. It will be discussed as part of the festival

Wednesday August 11

- 6pm Ian Livingstone – Eidos – A Life in Gaming.
- 7.30pm Neil Young – EA – *The Sims* and *The Sims 2*.

Thursday August 12

- 7pm BT Broadband: Showcase For Future Online Gaming.
- 8–10pm BT Open Door: Come and play some of the best online console games both on the market and not yet released at the Odeon in Glasgow.

Friday August 13

- 7pm Miles Jacobson – Sports Int. – *Football Manager 2005*.
- 8–10pm Emily Newton Dunn – One Dot Zero – Culture Of Fear.
- 9.30pm TBC.

Saturday August 14

- 2pm Jonathan Smith – Giant Ent. – *Lego Star Wars*.
- 3.30pm Lyle Hall – Heavy Iron – Disney/Pixar's The Incredibles.
- 5pm Ideas Factory and Dare to Be Digital – How To Break Into Game Development.

The Odeon ticket office can be contacted on 0871 2244 007.



Four Swords+ is one of the ten games you can vote for in the People's Choice award, but it faces stiff competition

Square Enix mobilises in Europe

The Japanese heavyweight joins forces with Vodafone to bring European gamers updated titles and new ventures

Having recently announced the appointment of a new CEO and president, John Yamaoto, Square Enix Ltd has made it clear that it intends to both strengthen ties with Japan and extend its involvement in Europe by publishing and marketing more of its own titles.

Part of the push includes a new collaboration with Vodafone to bring both old and new games to the mobile market. *Aleste* and Super Nintendo favourite *Actraiser* will both be getting updates, and a version of *Drakengard* (reviewed on import as *Dragon Dragoon*, **E**130) is to follow. Vodafone has promised more 'classic titles to come'.





Actraiser (left) and _Aleste_ (above) will be making their way on to mobile phones in the company of _Drakengard_ (below)

Dragon Quest games are already available to Japanese phone gamers, and a relatively lavish prequel to Final Fantasy VII has been announced







Square Enix has an existing relationship with Vodafone in Japan, where these three titles are already available. Although nothing has been confirmed for the European market yet, ports of 16bit *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* games are already available to Japanese phone gamers, and a relatively lavish prequel to *Final Fantasy VII* has also been announced.

More details on the company's recent movements are available at www.sqexm-eu.com

Recently reviewed

A rundown of last issue's review scores

Title	Platform	Publisher	Developer	Score
Silent Hill 4	PC, PS2, Xbox	Konami	In-house	6
Driver 3	PC, PS2, Xbox	Atari	Reflections	3
ShellShock: Nam '67	PC, PS2, XBOX	Eidos	Guerilla	4
Vib Ripple	PS2	SCEI	NanaOn-Sha	5
Future Tactics: The Uprising	GC, PS2, Xbox	Crave (US) JoWood (UK)	Zed Two	6
Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy	PS2, Xbox	Midway	In-house	8
Mashed	PC, PS2, Xbox	Empire Interactive	Supersonic	8
Shadow Ops: Red Mercury	Xbox	Atari	Zombie	4
Mario Vs Donkey Kong	GBA	Nintendo	In-house	7
Espgaluda	PS2	Arika	Cave	8
Perimeter	PC	Codemasters	1c	8
Karaoke Stage	PS2	Konami	In-house	6
Athens 2004	PS2	SCEE	Eurocom	6



Driver 3



Psi-Ops



ShellShock: Nam '67



Silent Hill 4

CUTTINGS



The Korean approach

It has become commonplace to observe that South Korea is leading the world in online gaming, but a recent mission organised by the International Centre for Computer Games and Virtual Entertainment (IC CAVE) at Abertay University, Dundee, allowed members of the UK game industry to see this first-hand. Representatives of Eidos, ELSPA and O2 among others visited local technology providers and game developers (including Phantagram, developer of *Kingdom Under Fire*) to discover how strong infrastructures and mobile phone based micro-payments enabled games to attract new and valuable revenue streams. It will be interesting to see if aspects of the South Korean approach – such as offering gamers the chance to buy games already customised with their favourite settings, or charging spectators for the privilege of watching pro-level gamers – will make an impact on the western online scene. The full report and details of upcoming events can be provided by Louisa Quilter (louisa.quilter@pera.com).

Judge bans mods

In the first case of its kind, the high court has ruled that the sale, use, advertising and possession for commercial purposes of PlayStation2 mod chips is illegal following a case brought by Sony against a man accused of selling 1,500 Messiah chips.

Sony brought the case under the EU's Copyright Directive, implemented in the UK in October, which makes it illegal to bypass copy-protection systems.

www.gameaudit.com

Playing the middleman

Returning to the fray with new set-up Game Audit, William Latham is hoping to bridge the gap between investors and the gaming industry

In one of the ironies life, and magazine production schedules, have a habit of throwing up, when **William Latham** last appeared in **Edge**, his studio Computer Artworks was facing closure. Despite having four major projects signed, the razorlike margins of the current development business model proved too much. But now, after some zero-technology time in the depths of the countryside, Latham has returned with Game Audit. Set up to provide expertise for companies looking to invest in the videogame industry, as well as project management skills for developers and publishers, Latham reckons it's part of a wider move to shake up the prevailing balance of power.

"While investors see the games industry as exciting and growing fast, they know it's fairly volatile and so they're unsure how to engage with it," he explains. "The role of Game Audit is to supply expert information so that the peaks and troughs are explained, understood and anticipated. In turn this will increase the flow of investment as confidence grows." And as these new funding sources become available, developers, in particular, should benefit – gaining more control over their destiny.

"At the moment we're in this strange situation where developers can find themselves subsidising the game they are working on to the tune of between $300,000 to $1,500,000 with little chance of royalties," Latham says. "No one in their right mind would run a business on this basis. You'll go bust in the end." This, combined with the typical loss of intellectual property rights to the publisher, means external funds rarely see developers as companies worth investing in.

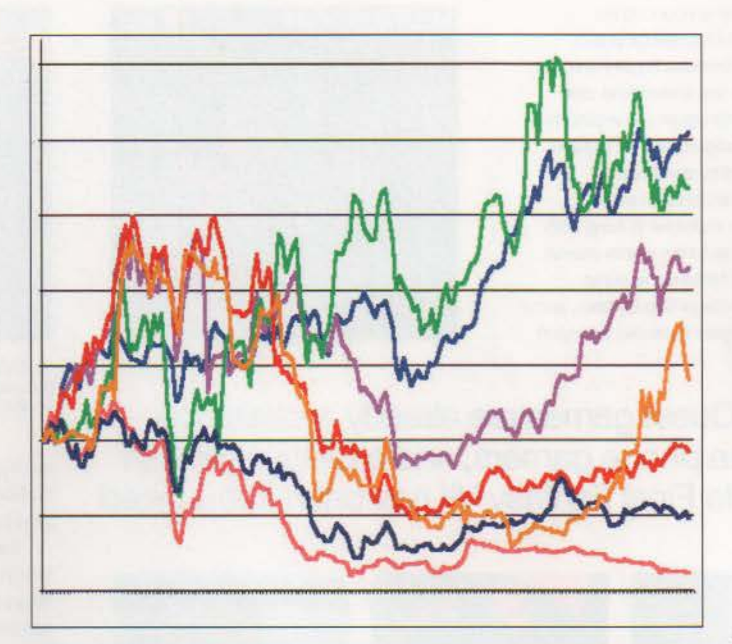
"I think investors are disappointed because developers should be a good deal; they are invariably full of bright people, have huge earning potential and a straightforward exit strategy. But as soon as a publisher strips out all the IP, it's no longer interesting," he says.

Another of the services offered by Game Audit is help for developers to put together film production-style completion bonds funding for specific projects. With these in place, developers can improve their negotiating position with publishers and keep their IP. But it's not just good for developers. Latham also thinks such methods will be vital for medium-sized publishers who find themselves competing with the 800lb gorilla that is EA.

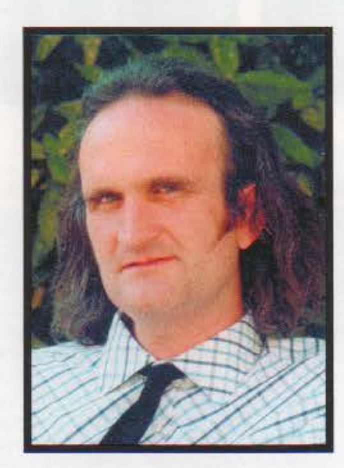
"They'll need specific product funding from many different parties to go head to head with the huge development and marketing budgets of EA, particularly for next-generation projects," he says, pointing out that it's normal for films to be funded from several different sources. "I think it will even end up that, to keep the best developers away from EA, the mid-range publishers will start being more flexible in terms of IP ownership," he adds, hopefully.

Of course, there remains a long way to go before this sort of business sea change becomes commonplace. But there are positive signs – Warrington-based Juice Games, for example, funded the development of its *Juiced* racing game for Acclaim with a multimillion completion bond, and it managed to retain the IP as well. Game Audit wasn't involved in that particular deal, but has completed its first audit. "We undertook operational and technical due diligence for a major investor group that was used for a multimillion-dollar decision," reveals Latham.

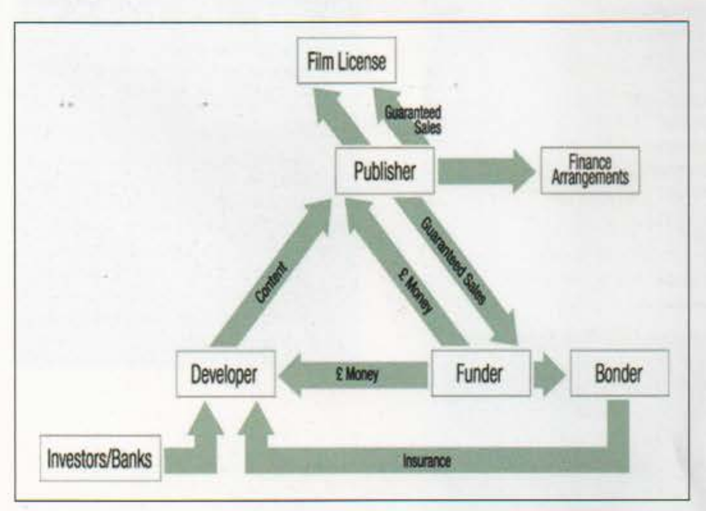
And there's plenty more to come, too. "I think it's time the big guys loosened their grip, and new investment flows can only help the process," he concludes. "In the long run this means more innovation. The alternative is an industry that becomes less profitable as consumers realise that they are being conned and being sold the same game again and again."



This graph of the rebased performance of game publisher stock since 2000 demonstrates the volatility of the market. With EA continuing to suck up increasingly large amounts of money and developers, Game Audit's William Latham thinks the other publishers will have to look to new funding models in order to compete in the market



Industry veteran William Latham: likely to be auditing a game near you soon



As the connections between developers, publishers, banks and investors become more complex, as shown here, the importance of companies such as Game Audit, which has been created to offer expertise and management services, is growing

Face off

www.image-metrics.com

Already tested in movies, Image Metrics' Optasia technology is now driving up the quality of games' cut-scene animation

Despite areas where games and films remain distinct as chalk from cheese, convergence between the two has almost become a given. What's particularly significant is the way parts of the two production pipelines are merging. The old restrictions of games as a continuous realtime medium and film as a one-shot frame-by-frame process are becoming blurred – film is learning the value of fast visualisation just as games gain from preprocessing art assets. Such an advantage is offered by Image Metrics' Optasia technology.

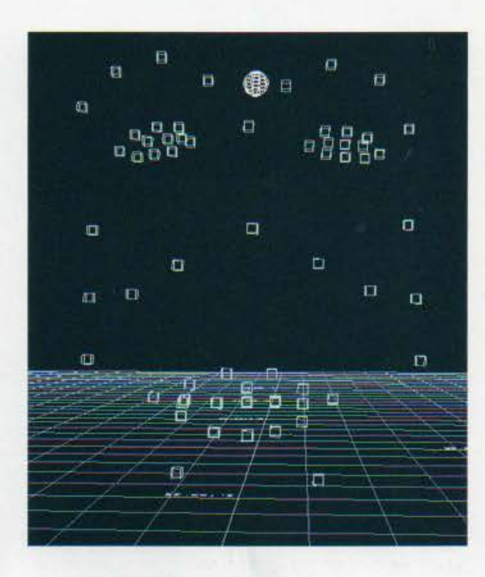
Already used for a major animated Hollywood film, Optasia is the result of years of hardcore research into the problems of computer vision. Broadly defined as getting a system to automatically analyse and understand the components of a visual scene, computer vision is a problem that has eaten up millions of dollars of research grants around the world. The sums involved are a tribute both to the complexity of the problem and the usefulness of the solution.

Spun out of PhD research from Manchester University, Image Metrics is marketing Optasia as a generic solution that can be applied to a multitude of tasks. Examples include golf training simulators and the filtering of X-rays as well as evaluation of the efficacy of drugs trials. But in the case of entertainment applications, the winning trick has been Optasia's ability to build and apply a statistical model of an individual human face to video footage of that face in action.

"Our unique selling point is being able to deal with the changes in appearance of very complex shapes," points out commercial director **Nick Perrett**. "It's an ability which allows us to do things such as take standard video footage of someone's face, track the motion, and then use that animation to drive a computer-generated mesh."



In its simplest form, Optasia can extract the animation data from raw video footage and then use it to drive a game mesh. It can be delivered to the client in a variety of formats



One advantage of this approach is its speed. Previously, the only way to do this sort of animation was to stick small optical motion-capture markers on to someone's face – a messy affair which often resulted in the markers pinging off if the movements were too extreme. The other is that the statistic model of the individual face created during the process means Optasia can filter any of the anomalies typically created during the sessions.

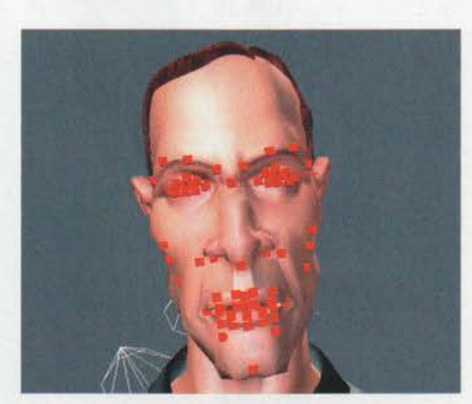
"The nice thing about the process is it doesn't really matter in what format we get the information. We can process video data, live-action film footage or even motion-capture data, if that's how people want to do it," Perrett says. "And as a data service, being able to process information very quickly is the core of what we do." The animation files are then connected to a muscle-based system via Image Metrics' proprietary re-targeting pipeline. The final results are handed back to the clients in whatever form their art department requires.

And the customers to date seem to be satisfied. Sony's London Studio used Image Metrics to provide around 90 minutes of facial animation for The *Getaway: Black Monday*'s cut-scenes. "They provided us with their Maya heads and we delivered the data back to them as animation curves in the same format as if it had been hand animated," Perrett says. Optasia has also been used to generate animation from the performance of a well-known Hollywood actor, who is playing the role of the leader of the Helghast hordes in the opening scene of Guerrilla/Sony's *Killzone* on PS2.

"Publishers want to push forward the quality of their animation and character expression, even for the current generation of games," Perrett explains. "Anyone working on a game with a lot of dialogue should be immediately interested in what we have to offer."



The result of the Optasia process is an easy method of recording great (and not so great) acting performances and mapping them to the characters' faces in game cut-scenes



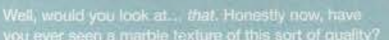
The trick is in Optasia's ability to create a statistical model of the actor's face which is used as a reference to remove any anomalies that look unrealistic to a viewer

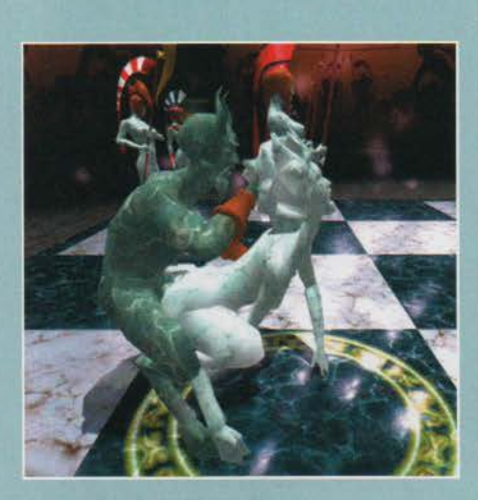


Image Metrics' technology was used to capture facial animation from actors such as Craig Scott, seen here performing for *The Getaway: Black Monday*'s cut-scenes

OUT THERE
REPORTAGE

01



Well, would you look at... *that*. Honestly now, have you ever seen a marble texture of this sort of quality?





02



A free-standing TFT monitor capable of taking any signal you throw at it? For use in the car? Here it is



01 Knight takes queen

Holland: We love chess and we love love, so *Lovechess* (slogan: 'Watch the Gods make love!') is a guaranteed ten, at least in Out There story terms. In *Lovechess*' own words, 'make love not war' is the rule when pieces take each other, leading to 'diverse and unique animations for all movements varying from very tender to very bizarre'. Which is sort of awesome. But it gets better: 'You decide who will have sex, and with whom when you play the game. Imagine all the combinations that are possible'. Oh, we have, *Lovechess*, in front of a variety of digital media many times since puberty. The characters' sexy actions are appropriate to the piece's representation; pawns, for example, are soldiers, whose spears assume (what we'd imagine is quite dangerous) phallic roles. Lovechess costs $17 (£9). For more information, head to www.lovechess.nl

02 Big Boy's bargain

UK: It's been a while since we've mentioned Big Boy Barry in this magazine, which is a constant source of sadness for a man whose appetite for JoyTech press coverage (for nowadays the ex-Games World videator plies his trade as PR manager for the peripherals company) is matched only by his appetite for seeing his own name in print. To that end, he loves us. You know – really loves us, we're his favourite magazine, and he'd never read anything else, at least not today – and a mention of JoyTech's Universal 7" TFT monitor would absolutely make his month. Oh, go on, then. The monitor handles just about any video source you care to mention, meaning it supports RGB inputs from all consoles, PAL and NTSC formats, and runs off a 12V car adapter. And our reward for bringing this life-enhancing information to you? "I will love you like a sister, or a favourite cousin at least," promises Triple-B. The screen retails for £150, and is out now.

Soundbytes

"I might try *Dance Dance Revolution* [again], but I'm thinking no."
Kimber Wilson, 15, considers her arcade gaming future. The teenager's heart stopped during a game of *DDR* at a local arcade; she was revived by the owners, and later diagnosed with hypertrophy cardiomyopathy, a hereditary heart defect.

"We are facing a critical situation, in which the number of game players will decrease unless we change tack."
Nintendo chief Satoru Iwata implores the gaming industry to pursue innovation in a speech to the Japan Economic Foundation.

"Failure to obtain a new banking facility would materially adversely affect the company's operations and liquidity and the company could be forced to cease operations or seek bankruptcy protection."
Acclaim pleads for a stay of execution, but things are looking grim...

"Why would one enjoy to rape a hooter in a game?"
An internet forum poster questions the appeal of *GTA*.

03 Liquid crystal is back!

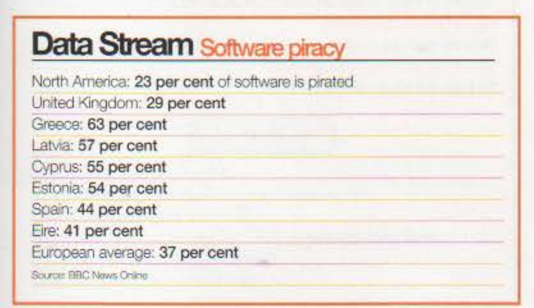
Germany: The last time we covered a PDRoms coding competition they were having a crack at reinventing *Robotron*. After the success of that they've moved on and, technologically speaking, backwards. Their latest programming free-for-all challenged users to create a Game & Watch-style game for their choice of (console) format, which meant a return to pseudo-LCDs for all participants with varying degrees of success. The winner, *Beer Belly Bill*, is a luscious tribute to Nintendo games of yore; also worth checking out are runner-up *Fred Firefighter*, and *MyRobot*, which came in third. All the entrants are available in a .zip file from www.pdroms.de (although without some kind of flash linking device you'll require emulators to run them). Have fun.

04 Who's a pretty poly?

UK: Swindon might not be high up on most **Edge** readers' list of holiday destinations, but if you fancy an excuse to visit the town's Museum of Computing, now might be a good time. The museum's latest acquisition is a Poly Play gaming machine, on loan from Andy Welburn (organiser of the Game On Barbican exhibition). The stand-up cabinet was manufactured in East Germany in 1985, and carries the curious honour of being the only arcade machine with Communist Party approval. It was one of 1,500 to be produced, but they were recalled for destruction at the fall of the Berlin wall; of the three left, one is on display in Germany, one is in a private collection, and the other now sits at the heart of the Swindon museum's High Score gaming exhibition. www.museum-of-computing.org.uk is the place to go for more information.

05 Finally, productive camping

US: New York University's $5,125 summer camp is aimed at high school juniors and seniors – essentially anyone above the age of 17 who fancies five weeks behind a monitor without their parents yelling at them to go outside. 'Study and practice creating concepts and prototypes for games', it offers. 'Use the latest in software, hardware, and development tools. Experiment with a wide range of palettes and learn to turn your wildest gaming fantasies into reality'. Sounds simply ideal, although we aren't quite sure we'd want to see our wildest 17-year-old fantasies become reality. And then we're back to *Lovechess* again. Well-off students wishing to enroll for 2005 might want to keep an eye on www.scps.nyu.edu/departments/course.jsp?courseId=44666

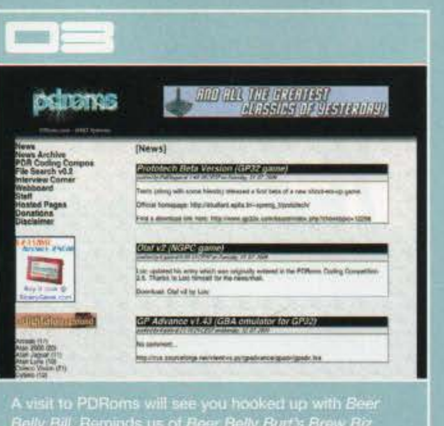


Data Stream Software piracy

North America:	**23 per cent** of software is pirated
United Kingdom:	**29 per cent**
Greece:	**63 per cent**
Latvia:	**57 per cent**
Cyprus:	**55 per cent**
Estonia:	**54 per cent**
Spain:	**44 per cent**
Eire:	**41 per cent**
European average:	**37 per cent**

Source: BBC News Online

03



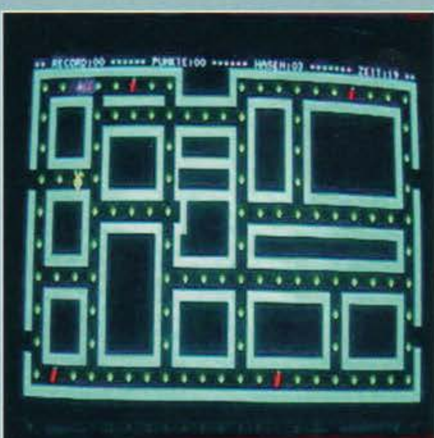
A visit to PDRoms will see you hooked up with *Beer Belly Bill*. Reminds us of *Beer Belly Burt's Brew Biz*

04



The museum's website has come on a bit since its launch was promoted on TV by **Edge**'s ex-publisher







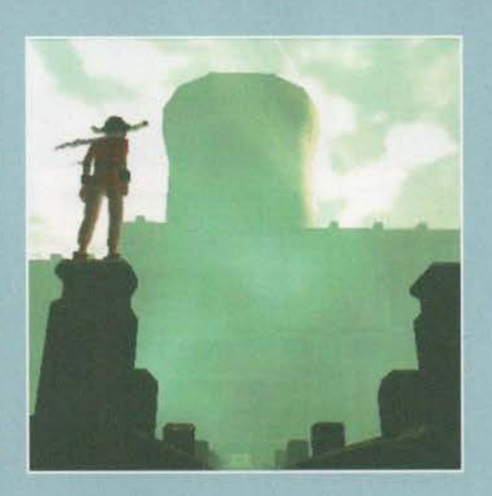
05

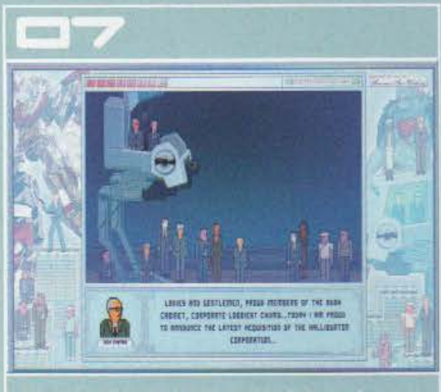




You don't need to have long hair and mostly black clothes in order to sign up, although it might help





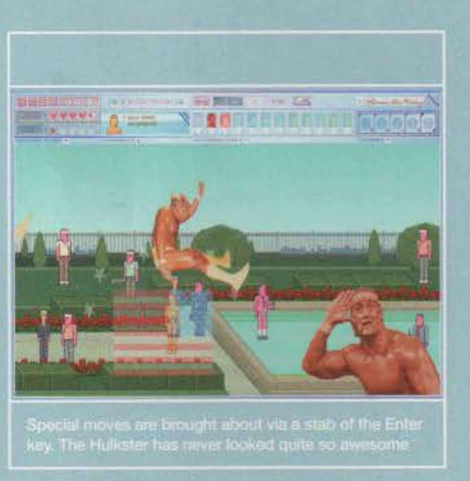


It's hard to imagine any other project fusing such careful pixelwork with antagonistic political sentiment



The artwork isn't all of the website creators' making, though – witness a star turn from a Japanese source

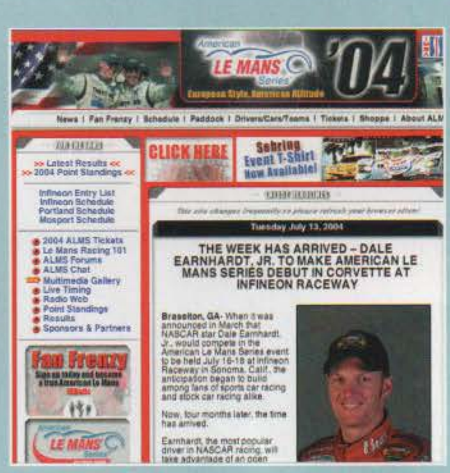




Special moves are brought about via a stab of the Enter key. The Hulkster has never looked quite so awesome



To make your own version at home, simply write 'Schumacher won' in crayon on your GBA's screen



06 Choose Yorda own adventure

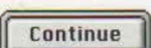
Japan: One of *Ico*'s greatest triumphs is that it successfully tells gaming's most affecting tale using the medium's strengths – atmosphere and interaction. Curious, then, that it should be chosen as the basis for a novel. It was author Miyabe Miyuki who asked to write the book, rather than being approached to produce some cash-in merchandise. The tale roughly follows the adventure, padding out the story with background information that's sure to have the 12 people who actually purchased the game in the west drooling – providing they can read Japanese.

07 Beat about the Bush

US: We've already heard lots about how this year's presidential election is turning pop culture into a political battleground, Michael Moore's cinematic polemic and his opponents' shout-louder retorts making people pledge allegiance in theatres and bookstores across the US. It makes sense that supporters of both parties would eventually turn to videogames for promotion – at least when the Republicans have finished trying to ban them – and so it is with EmoGame 2.5. An ex-**Edge** website of the month, www.emogame.com creates web-based side-scrolling brawlers that normally star members of angsty US alt.rock bands. EmoGame 2.5 dispenses with (most of) the emo, and pits He-Man, Mr T and Hulk Hogan against Bush, interspersing ropey game parody with facts (or propaganda, depending on your political views) about the current administration. It's an interesting use of technology, occasionally fascinating, and sometimes amusing. It's also totally tasteless, so viewer discretion is advised.

08 Card drivin'

US: The iCard is the stat-oriented motor-racing fan's idea of tech heaven: a cartridge that slots in the back of the GBA and provides up-to-date information on whatever event they're watching. Lap times, lap speeds, positions of racers and the gaps between them – you name it, if it involves men racing cars and it's measured in fractions of a second, it's there. Though it's of little use in the UK right now, the iCard system holds possibilities for the future of live sport over here, and not just for racers. There's no reason, for example, why football clubs couldn't stream highlights and replays to users' PSPs or DSs in a couple of years' time. And if there's money to be made doing it, they surely will. More info at www.icardus.com



PS3 to debut at E3 2005
Prepare to watch in awe as Sony delivers its biggest presentation ever

Games within games
How we wish the machines in *Spider-Man 2*'s arcade actually worked

The rise and rise of physics
It's been the future since *Exile* in '89

Quit

PS3 to debut at E3 2005
What's that? You aren't finished with your PS2 yet?

Driver 3 topping the charts
We haven't yet been able to find out how many were returned

This Disc Is Dirty Or Damaged
Actually, it turns out the Xbox is. Hmm



09 The Zenith Angle

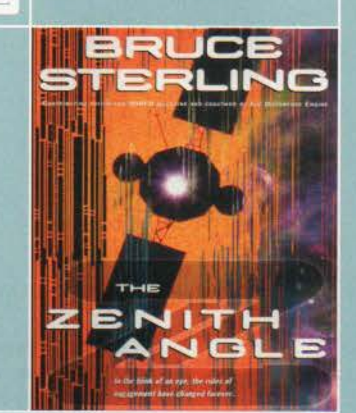
Within the triumvirate of pioneering cyberwriters, Bruce Sterling always seems to have been the odd one out. His co-author for The Difference Engine, William Gibson, has gone literary, while Neal Stephenson spawns historical swashbucklers. Sterling, however, seems content to sit in a transitory role. With his Wired column and writing gigs for Newsweek and Fortune, he has a much better idea of what's happening on the shopfloor of technology than his fellows. But, despite nine books, each punctuated by a characteristic mixture of humour, insight and readability, he hasn't made his mark as a novelist.

His latest attempt is The Zenith Angle. Set in the panic that gripped the US crypto-military complex in the months after 9/11, it follows the fortunes of Derek 'Van' Vandeveer. A veep of R&D in a soon-to-be dot-bombed internet traffic company, the computer security expert answers the call of the spooks, joining the Coordination of Critical Information Assurance Board. Mixing the rewards of building hack-proof streaming Grendel clusters with the trials of Washington-belt bureaucracy, it all makes for typical Sterling juxtaposition. With a deft poise, he has one security insider telling Van: "This is the future – it's phones against boxcutters, our networks versus their deathcult". In the new battlefield of cyberwar, it's time for the geeks to stand up and be counted. Yet in what turns out to be a bumpy narrative ride – culminating in a conclusion at which even a Tom Clancy ghostwriter would baulk – you're never really sure if Sterling is himself fully onboard, or subtly poking fun at the current state of affairs.

10 First Person

And so MIT Press continues its assault on the rockface of computer game theory. Reflecting much of the heat and vim of the academic standoff between ludologists and narrativists, First Person makes for some interesting reading. Within each section – broken down into broad areas such as cyberdrama, critical simulation and game theories – one writer sallies forth with their own particular view. This is then briefly critiqued on the bottom third of the page by another academic, while yet another then tries to bring some conclusion to the debate with a short ending statement, which is more fully expounded on the book's website (www.electronicbookreview.com). It doesn't make for pretty book design, but does provide the lay reader with a better view of where the disagreements lie. And, yes, are there some disagreements. The basic battlelines are set between those who see games in terms of narrative and stories (Brenda Laurel/Janet Murray) and those who prefer to see the medium as fundamentally about the game experience (Jesper Juul/Espen Aarseth/Markku Eskelkinen). The likes of MIT's Henry Jenkins attempt the role of mediator, his narrative architecture theory incorporating both story and play elements through the introduction of the concepts of game space and environment. Of course, the wider question of how this sort of debate improves the quality of games is less well formulated. It's not an issue for most academics as few are actually involved in game development. Yet the concepts discussed should prove useful for the thoughtful game designer, even one locked into our currently stratified genres.

09



Author: Bruce Sterling
Publisher: Ballantine
ISBN: 0 345 46061 8

10



Author: Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan (eds)
Publisher: MIT Press
ISBN: 0 262 23232 4

11



Site: **DIY Games**
URL: diygames.com/

11 Website of the Month

As the big publishers' game-making budgets creep steadily higher, and their reluctance to take chances grows in proportion to that, so it follows that real innovation seems like it can only come from the underground. That's why so much interest lies with the homebrew development scene, and DIYgames provides a fine way of keeping up with what's going on out there, eliminating the need to trawl a dozen sites just to find out what's new. With clean design and a simple brief, the site targets a niche, and successfully fills it.

12 Advertainment



This American TV ad for Sony's *Singstar* karaoke title features a performance that must merit the lowest number of points ever scored in the game.



The song begins: "People always talk about… ey-oh, ey-oh-ey-oh." Oh, the poetry of Jamelia



The small audience seems to like it, though, despite these two being unable to carry a tune in a bucket



"I dont know what it is, That makes me feel like this, I dont know who you are…" Thank God for that



Much to everyone's dismay, our over-excited new friend is such a slave to the beat he leaps on the sofa



No, no – not the bottle. Don't do it. Oh, he has. True rockstar that he is, he pours water over his head



Does he bite the head off a bat? Alas, no. Exposing his nipples makes him feel like a superstar, however



The fine line between 'star' and 'arse' has well and truly been crossed here. Can you do better?



REDEYE

A sideways look at the videogame industry

Spreading the word

It begins at a dinner, a function celebrating something or other, where RedEye is on a table with a few other videogame industry luminaries, just talking, when one of the guys sat across from him says it: "Do you even *like* games?" Allah, God, oh pleasant, merciful Jehovah: when the spots clear and the waiter's mopped up the wine and the people nearby stop looking and the band strikes up again, RedEye clears his throat and begins.

"Yes."

But he leaves it there, because obviously there's no point in arguing with someone who can't see the point in questioning the merit of those games that would destroy games, even though the argument itself is simple. Games are hyped to number one and sell millions, providing a short-term boost, but this also dissuades non-gamers who've bought into the hype from ever taking a chance on another game again. It does get RedEye thinking: how can we tempt more people into gaming? How are people ever going to find out which of our spectacular new worlds to visit? Simple. We need a brochure.

A holiday brochure. Glossy, inviting, promising exotic lands, full-page screenshots, full-on adjectives. Full of hyperbole, sure, but not lies. Every moment captured within would be available for intrepid adventurers to experience for themselves. Some of the moments wouldn't be replicated by some of the holidaymakers, but they'd never be totally outlandish claims, never be fictional. These would be postcards from the art's frontiers. Come To Videogames! See The Sights! Feel The Magic!

You can see... The Grottos. In *Rogue*, 20 years ago, when ASCII characters became the darkest of creatures in your head. When you reached unexplored dungeons, three levels below the farthest you'd ever been before, and you knew that each step forward was a step into the unknown and a step closer to permanent death. That pioneering spirit you felt then is the same as you feel now when you pick up the game for old time's sake, and it has never been bettered, only equalled.

The Night Sky. When you experienced freedom for the first time in the shape of *Elite*. You were leaping from star to star, growing in confidence, then all of a sudden there's a glitch, and the Cobra is trapped between points, stuck in witchspace. A cluster of Ls on your radar and closing, a brief glimpse of something alien, octagonal, before the shrieking lasers sliced through your warbling shields, and your hull surrendered. When the pixel-dust faded, and, without a FAQ or helpline, you found yourself wondering this: 'What just happened? Who were they? How can I make it happen again?' You never found out, and you never forgot.

The Old Citadels. When *Doom* forced you to accept that virtual reality would not be born from expensive neck-breaking headsets, but was appearing right now, in our homes. *Wolfenstein* was still Hunt The Wumpus: this was real life. When you saw polygon stairs and climbed them to an open window, peered out on to the balcony and saw mountains in the distance. You were in another world, a world where architecture was no longer writ in two-dimensional bitmaps but with pillars and vertices. You took your first steps through what would be a thousand id-inspired corridors, and held your breath.

The Ballroom. Understanding *Dance Dance Revolution*. Not an on-screen moment, this, but more a skew of perspective, the sense of synapses worming, touching, connecting in your head. When the game became less about reacting to the arrows at the top of the screen, and more about interpreting a musical store. When you suddenly worked out how to read the phrasing, and *Dance Dance Revolution* became about dancing, not twitching. When the power balance between you and the constant arrow dictation shifted in your favour, and you regained your freedom.

The Beach. The first time you walked along the shore and saw the sun rise over Liberty City. Maybe you drove out there with a prostitute in tow, murdered her for your money-back guarantee and then found yourself on the stretch of sand wondering what was just beyond that rocky outcrop. As you swaggered along, night turned to day and the screen bleached with red. For a moment you just stood there and watched. In the distance, a plane cut through the haze and you found yourself wondering: who is on that plane? Where are they going to land? Where have they come from? And for a moment you were there, a citizen of a strange land, feeling something that no other medium has the capacity to provide.

The Countryside. *Halo*'s rolling vistas felt more solid than any alien landscape yet, perhaps because they were populated by enemies of such fearsome intelligence. Or apparently, anyway, since once again your head wrote stories in the gaps between the AI waypoints. The hills were alive with the sound of Grunts, Jackals and Elites.

On level two, when you cowered behind the ridge and watched them prowl around the beacon, you caught a glimpse of the ring curling above you, a pale blue burst of light screaming to Halo's centre, and you knew you were going to die, but die happy.

As you swaggered along, night turned to day and the screen bleached with red. For a moment you just stood there and watched

There are more. Thrilling instances in videogaming can be intensely personal, but they're the reason we play. RedEye would love to hear your ideas for the brochure – his (new) email address is at the end of this column. Go glossy, go furious. Understand that there have to be negatives, things to rail against and people to rail against them. Understand that, and balance the negatives with the positives. Evangelise, but evangelise with care, because if we keep on praising the wrong things, we'll always be holidaying alone.

RedEye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with **Edge**'s. *Email: whoisredeye@gmail.com*

TRIGGER HAPPY

Steven Poole

Climbing the walls, reclaiming the streets



The wind is whistling past my ears as I crawl up the side of the Empire State Building. Just as I think I've reached the top, I see there's a mast: to scale it I have to jump over a jutting concrete platform. I actually have a slight feeling of vertigo. Then I reach the top and stand upright. Manhattan is laid out in all its glory below. The Hudson River glitters in the sunlight. It's beautiful, so I jump off. A beautiful swan-dive through thousands of feet of rushing air. The walls of skyscrapers are a blur. At the last second, I sling a web-line outward and describe a graceful pendulum arc, before somersaulting forwards to continue my aerial journey through the streets.

Trance classic As The Rush Comes by Motorcycle is playing on my hi-fi. "Travelling somewhere, could be anywhere..." It could almost be about videogames. At least, the specific videogame experience that we might call 'the rush', that exhilarating zone where adrenaline soaks the brain and you and machine are one. It took me by surprise in *Spider-Man 2*, since I don't think I have played a game that engineered such a consistent rush since the glorious *Wipeout 3*.

The rush depends on beautiful and exciting movement through characterful spaces. You can find it in parts of *Tomb Raider*, or *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time*, or when riding Epona over Hyrule Field in *Ocarina Of Time*. What makes *Spider-Man 2* special is that the developers have nailed an entirely new form of movement. Running, jumping, or piloting a vehicle suddenly look terribly staid and unoriginal by comparison. As may be expected from the developers of the *Tony Hawk* games, it's a bit like a skateboarding sim in the sky, except that there is less of a fundamental structural disconnect between joypad actions and virtual responses. An analogue stick is just made for swinging, and recondite combos are needed only for ground-level fighting.

It also brilliantly demonstrates the virtues of an excellent control system: you can muddle through happily with it at first, but it is also deeply learnable. At first you swing around, bump into walls and drop regularly to the sidewalk, causing pedestrians to jump out of your way in annoyance, but you're having fun anyway. You're having enough fun to want to improve, and when you get to the stage where you can flip, swing, tumble and somersault exactly as you choose, when you can swing with mathematical beauty around corners and flip off lamp-posts, you *are* Spider-Man.

Furthermore, *Spider-Man 2* offers a specifically *urban* rush. The big city, which for 19th-century novelists was the site of sin and corruption, becomes our playground. We are no longer owned by the city – we own it.

In a fascinating recent book about superheroes in popular culture, Matters Of Gravity, author Scott Bukatman argues that the sight of superheroes pursuing their unfettered modes of locomotion through the real-life city works to domesticate the dehumanised concrete sprawl, to render the urban space more open and democratic. Superman can fly and has X-ray vision: the city presents no physical obstacles or secrets to him. It is the same reason why the real-life French climber Alain Robert, who has free-climbed the Sears Tower, the Eiffel Tower and Canary Wharf, excites our wonder and admiration. He has said: "I free-climb buildings firstly because they exist, but also because they are the urban mountain." And what is Robert's nickname? Spider-Man, of course.

The real (that is to say, fictional) Spider-Man, too, can only do his thing where there are skyscrapers. London structures would not offer enough altitude for his web-slinging acrobatics. In Manhattan, he trumps the rigid, machinic grid system through his lovely arcing movements, as though writing something in a looping, cursive script that only God can read. And it is just this experience – of triumph over our metropolitan insignificance – that the game *Spider-Man 2* makes available to us.

Something important changed, really, when around the time of *Metropolis Street Racer* videogames became able to seriously recreate real-life locations. Now a game can offer a precious extra thrill if you have had the experience of travelling to its location. The allure of a real locale: how about Spider-Man in Shibuya next time? Already, anyone who has been to New York cannot help but marvel at the verisimilitude of *Spider-Man 2*'s rendition of the city. Of course, your favourite Starbucks or Krispy Kreme is not here, there are not enough cars, and it's all a bit shiny, but it is still recognisably New York. The developers' decision to put a pair of huge searchlights at Ground Zero, meanwhile, represents grace and thoughtfulness that we don't normally take for granted in the videogame.

Whether real or imaginary, cities are the new indoors. Games have begun to realise that the city is the ultimate playspace, and now they have the power to prove it. The next *Grand Theft Auto* is set in San Andreas. *Half-Life 2* replaces the industrial corridors and alien landscapes of the original with a heavily urban feel. I can't help feeling slightly less attracted by the more generically sci-fi vistas that we have so far seen of *Halo 2*.

Of course building a city to keep your game in does not guarantee a great experience: just look at *The Getaway* or *Driver 3*. But then look at the commercial success of these aesthetic duds: they are providing something people want, and I think that something is the urban rush. We have an automatic emotional familiarity with a cityscape, whether artistically designed or modelled on reality. We know the rules of the architecture and space, and are anxious to test them to breaking point.

We have an automatic emotional familiarity with a cityscape. We know the rules of the architecture and space, and are anxious to test them

And there is no apparent limit to the possibilities. In a way, it's payback. Technology, in the guise of the industrial revolution, gave birth to the grimy, overbearing super-metropolis. Now the technology of videogames gives us the power to soar above ant level, to demonstrate cognitive mastery over the urban vastness. It's time to reclaim the streets.

Steven Poole is the author of 'Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames' (Fourth Estate). Email: steven_poole@mac.com




AV OUT

Toshihiro Nagoshi

The end of communication as we knew it

In Japan, the television stations are filled with popular programmes that feature people arguing or debating. These kinds of TV programmes are not new – they have existed for years – but just lately they have multiplied and are being made in great numbers.

In the past they were limited to early or very late broadcast times – they were shown in the morning or very late in the night – but since they have become very popular and common now, they are broadcast in primetime slots, when the maximum number of people will be able to watch them.

Their content may be very diverse, but they are almost all made from the same fabric. You get a few regular faces representing different opinions and generations speaking about popular subjects or themes. These themes are set after doing some market research among the common people (the viewers). It happens that some of the regular debaters are also taken from among these viewers. You have very diverse profiles among these regulars – you may find artists, politicians, teachers, lawyers, doctors, students, labourers, etc… In fact, almost anything is good to attract people's (viewers') attention, meaning the shows can catch as large an audience as possible.

I was wondering why these TV programmes have become so successful, and developing that much, and I had a chance to speak with a TV producer to find out. He had some interesting answers to my problem.

I've said this before, but nowadays we are in the age of ubiquity. There has been an incredible jump in the number of ways that people can communicate with each other. But this means people have to deal with an increasing volume of information in their life. Before, you had some kind of reluctance to communicate with other people, especially the ones you don't know. Now, this barrier has disappeared, and it's 'thanks' to this age of ubiquity.

Indeed, not that long ago we had only a limited number of ways to communicate, mostly using the phone or post. But now we have such a variety, like these emails I use to send my column or even video conference-enabled mobile phones. Moreover, we can now chat using a PC or even our videogame consoles! Yes, modern gaming has become an active means of propagating this phenomenon. With this incredible increase in the number of methods of communication, this has created more opportunities to communicate with others. But following this, the TV producer had these very important words:

"That does not necessarily mean this increase in communication has been translated into an improvement in people's ability to communicate. I think it has represented the opposite."

He means that, while the methods or situations for communication were increasing, an improvement in content had not followed. So the communication capacity was losing its fundamental value. Why is that? The mystery was deepening. Here is his explanation:

The merit of the age of ubiquity is essentially one of convenience. This idea of 'convenience' means modern communication is working against the traditional idea of 'transmitting something to someone'. There is also another problem. For example, in the past when people had to communicate across a long distance they had to use the 'standard' phone or had to write a letter to make it possible. The person who was communicating a piece of information and the one who was receiving it had to do it in a very brief manner, making it easy to understand. They needed to be clever in anticipating that the other side may have had problems in getting the information right.

Moreover, in the past when you needed to set a rendez-vous – people used to set a place and a time and sometimes even set out the way to get to the meeting safely. That was all. But now, because you can communicate whenever you want, this process has become very rough, very uncertain. The two sides (the one who explains and the one who gets the explanation) are getting tired of getting into too many details. I feel like I have already experienced that.

So, yes, because of this new, too-convenient environment for communication, people have become less careful in their dialogues, and as a result of this their communication capacity has been diminished.

The TV producer added the following comment, as well: "The most troubling aspect of ubiquity is the fact that it creates so many ways of escape. The ubiquitous age could be characterised as the age of the 'numerous escape routes'. In your everyday life, you have many examples of undesirable situations, like when you have to speak to someone you don't like very much or talk about something you are not very comfortable with. It used to be something very difficult to deal with, but today it is not very important as people don't care much about these serious matters. Like when they discuss using these 'convenient means of communication' they don't always feel the need to care for details. All of society is getting just like that – you can 'escape' from the things you don't want to confront."

Mmm… I see. Again, I have the feeling I have had a similar experience before. And then the TV producer had this final thought: "In today's society,

"It is rare to see someone speaking face to face with another person with passion. It has certainly become funnier to watch others doing so"

it is rare to see someone speaking face to face with another person with passion. It has certainly become funnier to watch others doing so. People don't do so in their everyday life, or at least they used to but have stopped doing so, and that is why they find this entertaining to watch other people doing so on TV in these debating shows. Personally, I find this very strange."

I think he is right. We are may be witnessing the end of the 'normal' communication age. By that I mean the kind of communication that takes place directly with others without some sort of device getting in the way. Don't you think so?

Speak to you next time!

Toshihiro Nagoshi is general manager of Sega's Creative Center division. His games include the Super Monkey Ball *series and* Daytona USA

Art is subjective. One man's Picasso is another man's pissy old rubbish, which is precisely why most art critics contribute less to society than the average crack whore. Simply put, you can't win a debate about art. If you call a piece of art 'crap', the artist can argue: "Ah, but you're talking about it, therefore the art has served its purpose, and excuse me one moment while I insert this Polaroid of myself into my own bottom." It's a reasonable point, but does it apply to games, in an industry whose critics frequently credit a game's graphics with their own rating?

A wise man once remarked that he didn't see the point of paintings; why spend all that time trying to recreate a sunset when it'd be far easier and less time-consuming to capture one in a photograph? See, the whole reason people from The Olden Times used to paint was because they were too stupid to have invented cameras, but through hissing clouds of steam. I even invited my father round to show him the rippling water, gently waving foliage and the texture of rocks. I was profoundly entranced by the lush, tropical locale, the crystal-blue sea, soaring birds, darting fish and the glow bugs which glittered as night fell.

It was only when I called my 86 daughters in from the garden to point out the awe-inducing wonder of a mountaintop vista did I get slapped back into reality. Rather than be awed like myself, they were utterly unimpressed. And why should they have been otherwise? They'd just been out in the garden, where there were all the realistic textures and bouncing shadows and gently waving foliage you could ever want. Out in the garden were real birds, and real worms, and a real man watching them from the bushes. In the garden, things didn't ever slow down because too much stuff was going on. In the garden you could beautiful, but it's a different kind of beauty to *Wind Waker*. Though *Wind Waker* could've looked a little less bare, I respected what Nintendo was trying to do. I looked forward to the series being developed along similar lines, with the visual style being refined and built upon. Rather than stick to its guns, Nintendo has ditched the cel shading for a more realistic visual style. It seems that the days of genuine game artistry are already behind us.

Take a look at *Jak II*. It's a fun game, it looks good, but it's woefully un-designed. There's a bland laziness to the visuals, a sense they're merely serving a function rather than trying to impress. The examples of genuine gaming artistry – of worlds that have been *designed* for more than just functionality – are being outnumbered by the breathless race for simulation. Or, in the case of firstperson shooters, a campaign to reintroduce bland, 1960s concrete-block architecture. For



BIFFOVISION

Page 28, press hold, and reveal. 'Digitiser's founder speaks out

A tale of two Davids

would the reality of the Mona Lisa have had more worth than a painstakingly rendered portrait?

I had another PC die on me this week. I'm now on my third this year, and have finally given up on laptops due to the fact they either keep getting too hot, and bursting into flames, or I punch them until the screen breaks. For once, it wasn't too painful a purchase to make. I'd been meaning to upgrade ever since I bought the previous useless piece of badness, which first bust more or less the day I got it, and was barely powerful enough to run *Minesweeper*. This time around I bit the bullet, and went for a throbbing beast. With *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2* en route, and having suffered the indignity of playing *Far Cry* with the graphics settings so low that it was could've been *An Exciting Adventure In Origamiland*, I'd been getting jitters that I'd be left out of the fun.

Touch wood (matron!), but thus far it's proving a good buy. Apologies for stating what all of you already know, but *Far Cry* really does look as amazing as all those reviews said. Far and away, it's the most impressive recreation of reality ever seen in a game. I wasted about an hour on the carrier level just looking at the way the light played off a set of steps, and glimmered on the surface of a torpedo. I shot at light fittings so I could watch shadows bounce around corridors, refracting

throw a rock, and shatter next door's greenhouse, and you wouldn't think to stop and admire the way the glass fell to the ground as the sun flared off each individual shard. Admittedly, because you'd be too busy legging it, but I digress.

The girls were thoroughly unimpressed by *Far Cry* purely because the whole thing did look so realistic. "It's like a photograph," one of them remarked. And she wasn't wrong (although technically she was, because photographs don't move, the stupid little idiot).

As gorgeous as *Far Cry* is, you can appreciate that perhaps more time went into programming the routines to recreate light and shadows, and wavy plants, as it did the look of the game. How designed was the game world anyway? No doubt the trees, the huts, the guns and the costumes were referenced from real-life counterparts. In fact, the least impressive aspects of the game were the elements not drawn from real equivalents; the monsters were all a bit uninspired. It's endemic of a problem at the heart of gaming's trajectory.

My colon whimpered when I saw screenshots of Nintendo's next Zelda opus. It may indeed look

The examples of genuine gaming artistry – of worlds that have been *designed* for more than just functionality – are being outnumbered

every *Viewtiful Joe* there are a thousand *Jak IIs*. For every *Ico* there's a *Full Spectrum Warrior*. For every *XIII*, or *Rayman*, a hundred *Special Ops: Red Mercurys* or *Goldeneye 2s* or *Grand Theft Autos*.

Perhaps I'm woefully out of step with public sensibilities, but it seems a shame that fewer and fewer developers are investing in the visual side of things with any sort of coherent sense of design. Don't get me wrong – simulation has its place. You'd have trouble transporting yourself into *FIFA 2005* if the players were super-deformed caricatures, while the whole point of the *Gran Turismo* series is that it gives you the opportunity to drive cars you're too much of an impoverished pleb to ever be able to drive in real life. But there comes a point where you have to ask: why? Why does everything have to look so real and homogenised all of a sudden?

We need some more David Hockneys creating the visuals in our games, and a few less David Baileys. Who's he?

Mr Biffo is a semi-retired videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge's***

Edge's most wanted

Phantom Brave

La Pucelle has only made us hungrier for a more fully evolved version of Nippon Ichi's meticulous detail and terrifying depth. Book your holiday slots now.



(PS2) Nippon Ichi

Odama

Pinball and samurai! It's a match as timeless as matt black plastic and faux-wood veneer. Yoot Saito's art of war is a more enticing proposition than Sun Tzu's.



(GC) Nintendo

Starcraft: Ghost

Our anticipation had wavered during the uncertain delays, but the news that *Metal Arms'* Swinging Ape is *Ghost's* new developer has brought it flooding back.



(GC, PS2, Xbox) Vivendi

Destroy All Humans!

Why do we want to destroy all humans? We blame TV, videogames and the 1950s B-movies we saw as teenagers. Watch the skies, they are coming.



(PS2, Xbox) THQ

Hands across the world

Are your thumbs on borrowed time?

Of all the things that make games off-putting to newcomers, the joypad is the worst offender. Abstract and complex, it's easy to forget the years of practice that have ingrained the arcane notions of toggling, Y-axis inverting and D-pad selecting into our brains. The DualShock has 12 buttons. A piano has 12 notes. One we expect to pick up and use. The other we expect to take us ten years to master.

That's a preposterous analogy, of course. *Spider-Man 2* is hardly a Chopin prelude. It would, however, do the industry good if developers and publishers occasionally over-estimated the oddness of the joypad rather than continually underestimating it. Or, even more radically, is the answer to abolish it? Ditch the digitally abstract in favour of the physically instinctive? Three of this month's prescreens are joypadless. EyeToy, after a rather fallow period, is now being exploited by some of the most revered names in gaming: Konami and Sega. GameTrak, the system that uses tensioned strings and clip-on attachments to accurately replicate a full 3D range of movement, is readying for launch. Both systems have vast potential and make gaming an instant draw for those previously put off by not instinctively understanding that the circle button means cancel.

How can the joypad hope to survive now that movement sensing has become viable, portable and cheap? Why should gamers continue to tolerate something which has only been incrementally improved over the last 30 years? For now, developers hold half the answer to that question and gamers the other. Developers are struggling to successfully exploit the immediacy they offer. The whack-a-mole basics of EyeToy have long since worn thin and GameTrak has a long way to go before its software matches the solidity of its hardware. It will need both manifest creativity and encouraging market conditions before they begin to be mastered.

And gamers? We have to decide how willing we are to sweat. Both systems are capable of reducing your arms to flapping tubes of jellied agony. There are no machines in the gym that can prepare you for what happens when a truly compulsive videogame meets an EyeToy. Which means, for now, that the joypad is safe. After all, of all the forces in the world, few are as unassailable as laziness.















World Of WarCraft

It all started with orcs and humans, but now everybody's invited to Blizzard's flagship universe



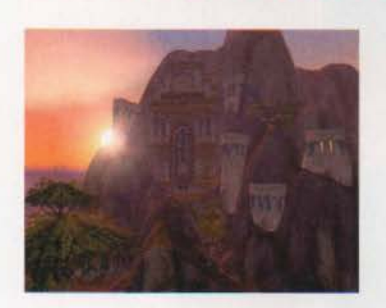
The Alliance – humans, dwarves, gnomes and night elves – has proved a more popular choice than the Horde's orcs, trolls and tauren (though the fourth Horde race, the undead, are well represented). In the Alliance, gnomes are unfairly unappreciated

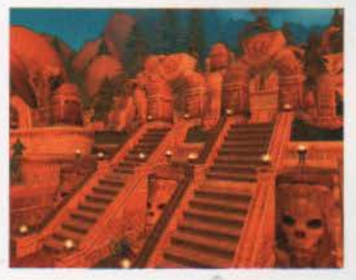
World Of WarCraft is big. That much could be expected from a developer whose games routinely pull in more preorders than many titles ever sell, but Blizzard's entry into the new wave of massively multiplayer titles casts a long shadow. The beta launch saw *WOW* fansites across the internet collapse in domino sequence under an avalanche of information-starved hits; there are 'US beta testers' with IP addresses from Argentina to the Ukraine; and at the time of writing there are accounts for sale on Ebay with bids at $350 (apparently it's a slow period).

Big in other senses, too: this is the result of four years of Blizzard's notoriously meticulous production, converging *WarCraft*'s extensive backstory and the developer's previous experience with online multiplayer into a new look at a familiar world. That familiarity doesn't necessarily have to stem from experience with *WOW*'s forebears – although Blizzard has helpfully provided a storyline synopsis on its website for newcomers – more if you ever had a soft spot for high fantasy.

WOW's visuals are a celebration of the genre, all exaggerated proportions and towering scale under a painted sky. It's an effective counterpoint to *EQ2*'s rendering of a fantastic world in a realistic fashion, just as jaw-dropping in its splendour, and possibly even more virtual life-affirming in its artistry.

There's an immediacy of experience here that allows players to reap rewards from only an hour's play as opposed to 12-hour marathons





The world's hand-drawn grandeur comes across well in screens, but in-game it's lent a startling sense of scale and distance

Though players are given ample time to enjoy the dense scenery, it's not as a side-effect of the paralysing grind that has turned many away from MMOs past. There's an immediacy of experience here that allows players to reap rewards from only an hour's play as opposed to 12-hour marathons: although given Blizzard's fiendishly precise appreciation of how to deliver addictive content, this is much like saying you can enjoy a bar of chocolate from eating only the first piece. Quests seldom conclude far from a lead into three more, a trainer offering a new skill and an unexplored vista just beyond the next ridge – all enticingly achievable if you were to put in just a little more time.

This pace is aided considerably by *WOW*'s energetic combat, which follows the traditional MMO structure of a rhythmic trading of blows, but is so up-tempo as to suggest an action-RPG (not least *Diablo*). Strategy comes from recognising the right moment to counteract an enemy skill or launch your own without risk of interruption, and class-specific mechanics lend further tactical considerations.



Warriors, for example, must build up a 'rage' level through giving and receiving damage in order to power their combat skills, whereas the Rogue attacks form cascading combos that build up to finishing moves. The basic spellcasters fall back on the familiar battle plan of keeping foes at a polite distance while pelting them with eldritch harm, but more complicated magical classes have correspondingly eccentric behaviour – such as Shamans, who create totems on the landscape to provide magical effects. Further variation in characters' combat ability is provided by the Talent system, a hierarchy of modifiers – and ultimately new abilities – that allow specialisation beyond the already dense skill trees.

Currently only the Warrior and Mage classes have their Talents in place, with the others to be phased in over the course of the beta; also to be implemented is the much-demanded ninth character class, the Hunter, which has the ability to tame wild beasts as animal companions.

Even with these omissions, the hype that *WOW* already feels like a finished game isn't completely unfounded – what's most obviously still in the process of development isn't so much the world (though the beta will





Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Vivendi**
Developer: **Blizzard**
Origin: **US**
Release: **Q4 2004**

Previously in **E**138













naturally shape it further), but the interaction of the players within it, at least on the player-vs-player servers.

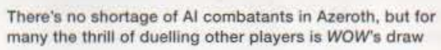
PvP is a necessary demand of both the fanbase and the *WarCraft* universe, which sees the Horde and Alliance factions at loggerheads. The current system has seen towns effectively shut down by high-level groups destroying NPCs, important quest destinations staked out by players preying on unsuspecting pilgrims, and powerful characters being near-unassailable even when outnumbered by slighter opponents. Though the first two are at least thematically fitting, it's an area of huge contention and may be Blizzard's trickiest balancing act.

However it resolves the war, there's certainly no shortage of craft.









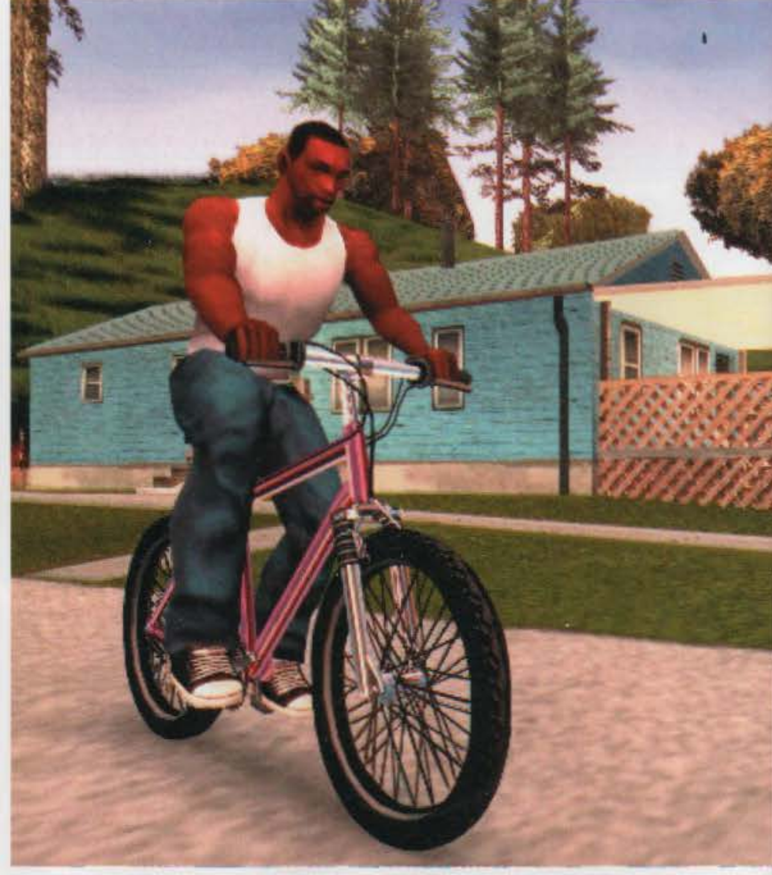
There's no shortage of AI combatants in Azeroth, but for many the thrill of duelling other players is *WOW*'s draw

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

A gap is already opening up in the pre-Christmas release schedule as terrified competitors back away. It can only be the return of GTA



Shooting from the pillion of a motorcycle at an SUV certainly adds a new gameplay slant to the *GTA* canon. These rural areas have a slight *Smuggler's Run* feel, and there are vast expanses to explore



Sony must be desperate for *San Andreas* to finally appear. There is no doubt that *GTA* games shift PlayStation2 consoles, and the lack of one in 2003 was keenly felt. Thankfully, despite the pressure of another lucrative exclusivity deal, Rockstar is staying true to the type of game it wants to make.

The initial setting – a neighbourhood based on South Central Los Angeles in the early '90s – doesn't court massmarket acceptance, but it does exude requisite levels of cool. Watch Boyz N The Hood or Menace 2 Society, listen to Dr Dre's The Chronic or Tupac's Thug Life Volume One and you've got the drift. Hustlers wear plaid shirts and sock hats with AKs stuffed into the bands of their sweatpants. The way that Rockstar has captured the lazy menace of LA street life, all smog-filtered haze and stoned G-funk, makes for an intriguing scenario.

One mission requires you to perform a four-man drive-by. Another has you shooting at cop cars through your back windscreen

Your character, CJ, has just returned to Los Santos (Rockstar's reimagining of LA) following the death of his mother. He finds his old crew, the Orange Grove Families, in decline, and his neighbourhood overrun by drugs peddled by rival gangs. Here begins the rebuilding of a criminal empire that will eventually encompass the whole state of San Andreas.

New features, as demonstrated by the opening series of missions in and around CJ's hood, include the ability to hijack BMXes, the satisfying animation showing CJ rocking from side to side as he pumps the pedals uphill or swings a leg out to get round a corner. CJ can get a haircut, or a new outfit, or alter his figure through over-eating and exercising, and all these choices will affect the way he is treated by his friends, rival gang members and the bent cops forever on his case. One mission requires you to perform a four-man drive-by. Another has you shooting at cop cars through your back windscreen or shaking motorcycle police off your bonnet after a tip-off at a gang meet. Rockstar appears to have rectified one of the biggest gripes affecting the *GTA* series since it went 3D, namely gunplay. The fact that you can now strafe while aiming in thirdperson, or choose between manual and auto aiming with all weapons, means that *San Andreas* can shed a little of its reliance on driving missions. Firefights are far from realistic showdowns – though this has never been the *GTA* way. At least now they are more thrilling, strategic and don't automatically make you simply want to nick a car and run everyone over.

Every time you fire a shot or steal a car, CJ's statistics are upgraded. This lends an invisible RPG element to the gameplay – the more you perform a certain action, the better





San Andreas' rural environments are a departure for the series. Draw distance looks good, with no evidence so far of fogging, but whether this fidelity is seen in the final game remains to be seen

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **Rockstar**
Developer: **Rockstar North**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **October 22**

Previously in **E**138





CJ will become at it. Along with the cosmetic personality enhancements provided by haircuts and the like, different players will reach the latter stages of the game with very different CJs, depending on the choices they've made.

All this can be discovered within eight blocks of downtown Los Santos. Ultimately there are three huge cities to explore, not to mention the rural areas in between. The countryside here amounts to much more than cursory linking scenery. A whole rustic identity has been forged, comprising farmsteads and log cabins, sleepy one-horse towns and trailer parks. Take a trip in the dodo and you can see just how amazingly expansive the environment really is: you can fly for minutes and not see another settlement. Traversing the environment on ground level with one of the all-new vehicles such as the quad bike or the monster truck, it becomes obvious that this isn't just empty space. There are side missions to discover down every dirt track.

Small towns, such as the upwardly mobile Dillimore, have their own personality, their own gangs of hoodlums and their own opportunities – stealing an articulated petrol tanker from a gas station and then attempting to outrun the local vigilantes, for example. There's even a half-mile-high mountain for you to climb.

Where most story-based games follow a linear path from A to B, those in *San Andreas* expand outwards until A simply becomes a tiny dot in the vast expanse of B. We haven't even seen San Fierro (San Francisco), Las Venturas (Las Vegas), the desert or the beach yet. Surface barely scratched, it's obvious that *San Andreas* is a mighty prospect. In the two years since *Vice City*, no other developer has come close to snatching the mantle from Rockstar in the driving/action/crime/free-roaming-city stakes; just look at the recent dismal failure of *Driver 3* to expand its empire. Take a deep breath, because *San Andreas* looks like it'll be *big*.



Bikes are set to be the new PCJs, it seems. Whether or not Rockstar plans to convert *San Andreas* into one gigantic Tony Hawk-style stunt park is unknown, but this would be typical of the freedom of movement that the *GTA* games engender

Conflict: Vietnam

Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **SCi**
Developer: **Pivotal Games**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **Autumn**

Previously in **E135**

Pivotal heads further back in time for its latest game, moving from the Middle East to South East Asia



While in publishers' eyes Vietnam is the new WWII, we have yet to see a game focusing on the disastrous US struggle against the Vietcong that's able to match the better examples inspired by the international conflict of 1939-45. Yet with so many in production, it's only a matter of time.

From the current state of *Conflict: Vietnam*, that day has taken a substantial step closer. Looking to repeat the huge success it's had with two great – provided you sweep morality under the (Bedouin) rug – games based on the first Gulf War, Pivotal has understandably remained posted close to a proven format. So the four-man squad, first/thirdperson dynamic of its *Desert Storm* titles stands fast, and, while much of game will feel pleasingly familiar to *Conflict* players, the formula has evolved since the last sortie.

For instance, you can now control your four-man team with an extended range of commands, some of which are context sensitive (eg, shield a medic while he heals a downed soldier), and the revised system ensures that even in the heat of battle issuing orders is a mostly straightforward and relatively risk-free affair. Your squad members now respond in a more convincing manner, becoming genuinely dependable, which is more than can be said for the trigger-happy NPC GIs who shoot through you should you cross their line of sight during firefights.

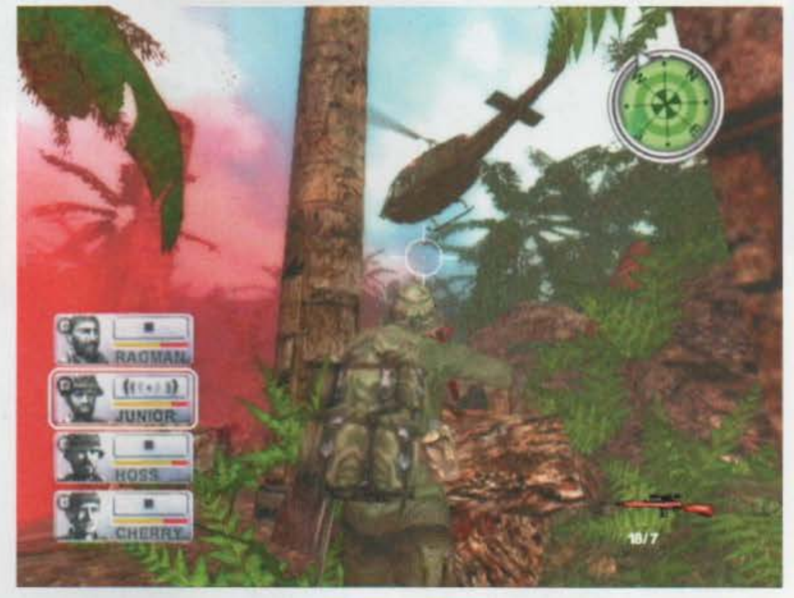
Other issues currently include occasional collision-detection problems, and the game still exudes the 'clunky' feel of previous *Conflict* games, although nothing as debilitating as that in, say, console *Medal Of Honor* titles. Replaying through levels (due to an absence of checkpoints) highlights the scripted character of the enjoyable events.

Indeed, *Vietnam*'s strength is undoubtedly the remarkable sense of tension it generates. Combat is atmospheric, capturing the terror and confusion so vividly depicted in Hollywood war films – it's not unusual for your squad to find itself pinned down, low on ammo and facing a seemingly relentless enemy onslaught. Jungle crossings swap the frantic, messy nature of combat set-pieces for a more considered and tactical approach; the change of pace is welcome, although the experience is no less edgy – traps, snipers and enemy patrols see to that.

Provided the developer irons out a few niggles, this could become the most engrossing Vietnam title to date.



This isn't the prettiest Vietnam-based title around but it is an improvement over Pivotal's *Desert Storm* efforts. Besides, the attention to detail makes up for some lack of polygonal detail – you can shoot river fish, while vegetation reacts to grenade blasts, for instance



Squaddies

The game's 14 missions focus on a squad of four soldiers who, cut off from their unit following the brutal 1968 Tet Offensive (played early on in the game), must fight their way back to safety. Their gruelling journey will see them make use of any discarded equipment they encounter, including river boats, helicopters, tanks and gun placements. The introduction of narrative is a new development for the *Conflict* series and along with *Vietnam*'s impressive audio (which includes licensed music and foul-mouthed language as well as great spot effects) adds much to the game's already convincing atmosphere.









Squadmates are listed on the left of the screen with commands to give to them on the right

Second Sight

Format: **GC, PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **Codemasters**
Developer: **Free Radical Design**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **Q4 2004**

Previously in **E**135, **E**138

Good business sense and foresight on the part of Codemasters, or is this destined to be forgotten in the pre-Christmas rush?

Stealth is now a dread word in the videogame industry. So many developers try it, so few succeed. It's interesting, however, that the games that have employed sneaking well, like *Manhunt*, *Thief* and *Metal Gear Solid*, have done so by giving the player a clear indication of whether their character is out of sight. Whether it's a stealth icon, vision cones or a light crystal, it's important to know if your footfalls are going undetected. *Second Sight*, however, has no such system, and as a result its brand of stealth can be irritating.

In the early levels there's a lot of hiding in cupboards, sidling along walls and peeking around corners, but it never feels as fully integrated as in its obvious source material. Fortunately, Free Radical has built the game so that stealth is an option, but it always seems to be the most frustrating option. On current evidence you make much quicker progress by charging around, battering guards then hiding in ducts until the commotion dies down. Then repeat. Thankfully, *Second Sight* has plenty more tricks up its sleeve.

The game's main focus is on clever supernatural powers, and these are gradually introduced as the story unfolds. Tapping into the current fashion for physics, hero John Vattic can telekinetically move, destroy and fling a fair number of objects in the environment using his mind alone. It's all done adroitly via the analogue triggers, one to charge up the ability, the other to focus on the item. Other mind tricks include Charm, a kind of cloak of invisibility, and Projection, the power to possess enemies. It's also a mighty relief to have a recharging health power in a game that sees angry swarms of guards frantically shooting at you whenever they're alerted.

Sure, there's a question mark hanging over the stealth feature so prominent you expect it to be accompanied by that trademark sound effect, but Free Radical's distinct art style, attention to detail and clever structuring should compensate. Vattic's search for his identity after waking up in a research lab is clichéd but getting to actively take part in the flashbacks is novel and involving. Once the guns come out matters improve greatly, too, and the thirdperson gunplay is blessedly joyous.

It may not do enormous numbers at retail, but *Second Sight* has the potential you'd expect from one of the UK's most reputable developers.



The sniper scope works excellently, placing a tiny reticule on an enemy in the distance but also offering you an adjustable zoomed-in view (above). Targeting and sensitivity are spot on



It's possible to charge around and shoot enemies in the torso until they expire, but with practice quick head shots pay dividends. The game is ready, and just waiting for a convenient release date



Hack infection

Wouldn't you know it – Vattic wakes up without two memories to rub together, but at least he has special powers to compensate. Accessing a computer dredges up a few details about his plight; it also allows him to examine maps, open security doors and fiddle around with CCTV cameras. The mouse pointer and icons are a great touch and such details give us hope that this will be more than the sum of its eclectic parts.

Blood Will Tell: Osamu Tezuka's Dororo

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Sega
Developer: In-house (previously Sega Wow)
Origin: Japan
Release: Q4 2004

Previously in E13

When slash 'em up meets fairytale – Sega's interpretation of a Japanese classic is almost Ico With A Vengeance















Holding down the button charges a special attack which, if successful, allows you to land a flurry of slashes by following rapid button prompts. Each enemy type has a set list of items it may drop, as in *Castlevania*, and long combos will force the rarer drops

Sega's second adaptation from an Osamu Tezuka manga, following *Astro Boy*, Dororo may not have the western recognition of its sister story – hence the relegation to a subtitle – but it's rich source material. Wandering samurai Hyakkimaru is on a literal quest of self-discovery: a demonic pact sold his body parts to 48 fiends before his birth. Now fully grown, and reconstructed with weapons ensconced in each artificial limb, he sets out to reclaim his humanity accompanied by child thief Dororo.

His trail of revenge makes for an endearingly unconventional slash 'em up – not least because he has more options at the outset than many protagonists finish their games with. Carrying twin blades in his forearms, a more practical sword at his side, an arm-mounted Gatling gun and a cannon in one thigh, Hyakkimaru is a one-man army.

Well, two-man army, as Dororo's never far behind unless his pathfinding fails him. His default contribution is to attack random opponents, but he can be ordered to stay behind Hyakkimaru (the safest place in a boss fight), to pick up items or most importantly to scout for hidden areas, as not all the fiends are waiting along a level's beaten path.

Overcoming each enemy in a brisk boss fight recovers a body part, and these boost Hyakkimaru's statistics, in addition to providing more tangible bonuses: an eye turns the monochrome world to muted colour, a leg enables a dash attack. Sensibly, replacements for his weapon-limbs are staggered throughout the game, ensuring their loss is offset by new-found natural abilities.

There's so much ground to cover – even before the game starts flicking between playable characters and gameplay styles – that the still-traditional underlying design can't quite keep up. This manifests in bouts of redundant backtracking, an absence of Sega spark in the early boss fights, and the lack of an appreciable difficulty curve with the standard enemies, who are either pushovers or unfairly tough. Visually, too, Sega's late arrival on PS2 sees it struggle to work around the architecture's shortcomings.

Single out any aspect of *Blood Will Tell* and you can find fault with it, but they're shuffled with such a magician's flourish – and the deck is cut with moments of inspired brilliance – that it almost pulls it off. If the remaining development time tightens loose ends, this could be Wow's (posthumous) masterwork: like Hyakkimaru himself, it's more than the sum of its parts.

Red Ninja: End Of Honour

Format: **PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **Vivendi**
Developer: **Tranji**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **October**

Previously in **E**136

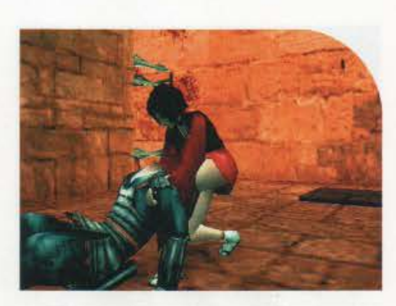
Even lady ninjas armed with cheesewire have to face off against the ultimate enemy: the thirdperson camera



There's no question that Kurenai, *Red Ninja*'s heroine, is going to become something of an icon. Her underwear-flashing acrobatics generated thousands of downloads of the game's E3 demo, and her seduction attacks (which lure guards to a bloody death with a come-hither giggle) constitute a new kind of fighting dirty. Her short skirt isn't just idle titillation, however. It adds to her sense of character as she soars through caves and dungeons light as gossamer. Her Tetsugen wire – her only real weapon – is a potent threat, but her defences are surprise and ingenuity. This is the other end of Sam Fisher's tooled-up spectrum.

What works well is the creativity of combat, as you string up unsuspecting guards and scythe their torsos in two with a slick twist of your wire. The balance of exploring, fighting and puzzling is also strong, with each level seeing you move smoothly from one task to the next. It was never a game that was going to dominate through its visuals, but the worlds are smoothly presented and imaginatively designed. At this stage in development, the most pressing problem is the camera. Though its swooping movements are dramatic and satisfying, Kurenai's disregard for gravity presents it with some serious problems to which it does not yet have solutions.

The Tetsugen is a means of locomotion as well as execution, but Spider-Man's fluid web-slinging may overshadow some of Kurenai's more mechanical and limited wire moves





The puzzle sections seen so far are very straightforward – decapitated guards can be dragged on to pressure points to disarm traps

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **THQ**
Developer: **Relic**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **Autumn**

With painted miniatures at the ready, it's time to delve into the future-gothic world of Relic's ambitious new RTS





The interface is large, clunky and a touch intrusive, appearing as it does at the top and bottom of the screen. The mini-map works well



Your troops can be viewed from any perspective or level of zoom, meaning you can zip around with ease or take a detailed interest in the carnage

Where *Neverwinter Nights* brought us tabletop D&D on the desktop PC, *Dawn Of War* digitises Warhammer 40,000. It's a bit *Age Of The Empire Strikes Back* and, sticking with the innappropriate Star Wars theme, reminds us a little of *Force Commander*. Villagers – sorry – Servitors build structures, which in turn pump out infantry, vehicles, giant demons, etc, and, unusually, many troops fight just as well up close as with their guns. The focus is on the combat, with resource management limited to node-capturing.

The four races, Space Marines, Orks, Eldar and Chaos, are very similar to their tabletop incarnations. The Marines are powerful but expensive, Orks are inaccurate but numerous and work best in mobs, Chaos are a bit like the Marines but with the addition of demons and demigods. The Eldar (space elves, really) are the most interesting. Fragile but superb shots, the subtle balance of their Aspect Warriors can make or break an army. They also have the game's best animation, as their Wraithlord dishes out kicks and chops that look great in the zoomable and rotatable 3D engine.

Disappointingly, there are no Genestealers, as seen in *Space Hulk*, and, in the preview build, no singleplayer campaign. But developments on the battlefield will be awaited with interest.

Sega Superstars

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Sega
Developer: In-house (previously Sonic Team)
Origin: Japan
Release: Q4 2004

Previously in E137

Virtua Fighter and The House Of The Dead get the set-top camera treatment in what could be a very good month for Sony's EyeToy





With eight more minigames to unveil, there's hope for more gameplay flexibility than the usual EyeToy slap-the-bad-guy speciality

Regardless of how novel a device it is, EyeToy is only going to succeed on the strength of the support it enjoys. It's therefore encouraging to see industry stalwart Sega getting in on the act by appropriating some of its biggest franchises for motion- sensing treatment. Some 12 minigames should feature in the final game, but the preview version we toyed with offered a fun (if brief) four.

Perhaps the most obvious transition, *Samba De Amigo* replaces the maracas with hand movements and therefore does little to alter the already great play mechanic. *The House Of The Dead* has you slapping waves of zombies away before confronting a tenacious boss, although the latter is also dispatched with a series of well-placed air smacks. Meanwhile, *Sonic The Hedgehog* sees you controlling the speedy mascot down a 'bonus' tunnel by moving your hand, collecting rings and gems while avoiding spike balls. And, in a particularly convincing deployment of the EyeToy technology, *Virtua Fighter* squares you up to Akira whose attacks you must block while exploiting opportunities to hit back

As with all EyeToy undertakings, there could be an argument for further refinement, but on current indication the potential for great party-game material seems completely assured.



After months of maraca frustration, EyeToy *Samba* is a successful replacement. Precise and instinctive, the freedom from cables encourages extreme *Samba* freestyling

U Move Super Sports

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Konami
Developer: In-house
Origin: Japan
Release: Out Now (Japan) September (UK)

Konami launches EyeToy's first spanking game. But save your blushes, because fun doesn't come any purer than this

U Move Super Sports might just be the most vibrantly designed game of the year – so far, at least. EyeToy games aren't usually noted for their visuals (unless you happen to be a supermodel) so it's a happy surprise to find so much artistry and invention in the characters that cavort around you as bounce, bat and barge your way through Konami's bizarre decathlon.

The game's main innovation is how it positions your image on the screen relative to each particular task. Select a baseball game and you'll be positioned top left, with ample space to grab an umbrella as an impromptu bat. Horse riding perches you astride a fat-tongued steed, walloping your own backside to spur it on.

Also included are a suite of abstract sandbox games which turn your EyeToy into a kaleidoscope or a slide-puzzle generator. One requires you to incite a desperately dejected flower to dance: failure is simply too heartbreaking to contemplate. Another turns your image into a bunch of sliding tiles, feet and head amputated like a magician's assistant. It's a generous package, but as of yet only a few of the games have been fully optimised and polished. EyeToy has felt a little becalmed since *Play*'s triumph last year. *U Move* could be just the thing to reinvigorate it.



The resounding thwack as you hit each baseball does a surprisingly effective job of convincing you that there's real contact between your real bat – or umbrella – and the virtual ball





Pinball ought to be one of the game's best ideas, but having to use both arms for each paddle is both frustrating and unintuitive

Burnout 3

Format: **PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **Electronic Arts**
Developer: **Criterion**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **September**

Previously in **E**135, **E**138

The 'offensive driving' of the second game turns out to have been positively polite compared to the metal-buckling freeway jousting of its sequel



Impact Time, which allows you to add aftertouch to your car's trajectory, is crucial in crash mode. Use it to trigger enough collisions, and you earn the right to detonate your vehicle in a shower of sparks and points

The latest iteration of *Burnout 3* code boasts production values to match the dizzying velocity and apocalyptic crashes – EA's big-screen treatment and Criterion's technical ambition culminating in the anti-*Turismo* of arcade racers.

Also apparent is racing's continued relegation to the passenger seat. Displaying the skills learned in previous games, like holding an unblinking game of chicken down the oncoming lane, nets meagre reward compared to that for even the most unthinking shunt of a rival racer. This may bewilder some fans of *Burnout*'s previous supersonic purity, but Criterion has at least changed direction with the accelerator firmly floored, providing a far more pulse-pounding take on 'vehicle combat' than any rocket-launching genre stalwart.

Crash Mode now features the appropriate ramps and, surprisingly, equally appropriate power-ups, to turn the original game of automotive roulette into a shrieking metal pinball set: doubly so with the addition of post-collision spin, allowing you to redirect your fracturing wreckage (in fetishistic slow-mo) at virgin traffic. Even more satisfying in the main game, it transcends the impression of a flashy gimmick the moment you pull off that fatal, dreamlike spin into the path of a desperately swerving rival. Buckle up.





The co-op crash mode requires players to co-ordinate and grab matching power-ups to gain full advantage as they slam into junctions

Dark Wind

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **In2Games**
Developer: **Atomic Planet**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **Autumn**

Previously in **E**137

The first game for the GameTrak demonstrates that, in motion sensing, hardware is only half the battle





Character design is *Dark Wind*'s strongest point visually, although *Dead Or Alive* now faces a new contender in the jiggle stakes



The more you hit an opponent, the more it builds up their 'rage' bar. Once full, they will launch into a flurry of attacks which will test your blocking skills to breaking (or losing) point

It's tiring. That's the first surprise of In2Game's GameTrak movement sensing controller. Its spring-loaded cables, though light and responsive, exert a continuous pull which adds considerably to the sense of connection with what's happening on screen. And as things stand, what's happening on screen is a rudimentary beat-em-up, with blocks and combos requiring more precision than the game can currently offer.

The second surprise is how strongly the firstperson, real-world movement approach affects how you feel about your actions in-game. Punching a woman's face to blood and bruises is much harder to stomach when it's your own fists doing the punching. The emotional response of some players – one GDC-goer spotted a resemblance in one of *Dark Wind*'s characters and rushed to makers to say: "Thank you, thank you, thank you! You have given me the opportunity to beat up my girlfriend!" – points to the incredible potential GameTrak has, and the substantial pitfalls it faces. For now, it seems the software is holding back the hardware. Developing for such a radical peripheral can't be easy, and as developers become more experienced we'll see if GameTrak will be the device to deliver the eternal Shangri-La of full motion sensing.

Prescreen Alphas

This month's announcements and updates

Children Of The Nile

Format: PC
Publisher: Myelin Media (US), Sega (UK)
Developer: Tilted Mill





Sega of Europe has picked up this impressively detailed Egyptian city sim from the team behind *Pharaoh*, featuring a *Sims*-style social dynamic along the banks of an authentically modelled Nile

Far Cry Instincts

Format: PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal





Delayed from its end-of-year slot to Q1 2005, *Instincts* will now appear on PS2 in addition to Xbox. It's not yet known if the PS2 version will retain the interesting map-making functionality

Pro Evolution Soccer 4

Format: PC, PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Konami
Developer: In-house





Not content with representing 136 club sides, 50 national sides and more than 4,500 players, some with individual moves, *Pro Evo 4* also boasts an on-screen referee for the first time

Scrapland

Format: PC, Xbox
Publisher: Enlight
Developer: Mercury Steam





Spanish developer Mercury Steam's '*GTA*-style' project, set in a robotic world, has recently been nudged into the spotlight by American McGee, formerly of id, signing on as executive producer

Vivisector: Beast Inside

Format: PC
Publisher: Brigades
Developer: Action Forms





A Ukrainian-developed FPS inspired by HG Wells that pits your special forces soldier against cybernetic mutant animals that have been quietly evolving on an island for 100 years. Expect blood

Viewtiful Joe

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Clover Studio





It's 'just' a port, of course, but a welcome and unusually deft one. Dante fits the aesthetic perfectly, and the inclusion of the easier 'sweet' mode gives the impatient a chance to progress

Guilty Gear Isuka

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Sammy
Developer: Arc System Works





The fourplayer fighter that takes the already seizure-inducing GG experience even further over the top hits PS2 this month, with new modes and key-wielding artificial girl ABA's debut

Johnny Whatever

Format: Xbox, other formats TBC
Publisher: Warthog
Developer: In-house





Warthog's new title sounds good on paper – punks deliver a dystopian London from the Iron Royals' tyranny – but it remains to be seen if the game can scale the heights of its concept



Game: **Metroid Prime 2: Echoes**
Format: **GameCube**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Retro Studios**
Origin: **US**
Release: **November**

FUTURE ECHOES

Samus Aran has arrived on a new planet, bristling with fresh dangers. But what has another Prime got to offer the seasoned space adventurer?

The aperture's mechanism makes a dull shwooshing noise and opens to reveal the great outdoors. Before you lies a sandy pathway flanked by rocky walls. Your view of the landscape is obscured by sun flare oozing into your combat suit's visor, so you take a step forward, and it is obscured by overhanging outcrops, giving you a clear view into the distance of this alien world, all Rodney Matthews colours and weird-looking artefacts. The music, subdued, drawn-out tones aligned to a rhythmic bassline reminiscent of John Carpenter's early-'80s heyday, maintains a steady pace in the background. You step forward once more and scores of bugs, alerted by the presence of foreign feet, rustle and scurry across the ground like a virus going to work on a victim, gone again in an instant as they find new hiding places among the crags. A small shiver worms and wriggles its way down your spine. Then the real threats arrive, bursting from the ground in fizzing showers of dust, and you remember that, conveniently, you've brought along a grab bag of serious firepower...

On the face of it, this could be a sequence snatched from the original *Metroid Prime*, but, when you're actually in the thick of it, navigating its terrains and encountering its indigenous lifeforms, the sequel's differences are clear. *Prime* number two, subtitled *Echoes*, is an even darker game than its predecessor. Everything has been engineered to feel grittier, murkier, more uncomfortable, leaving those who found the *Prime* experience one of isolation and loneliness facing an even less welcoming experience.

Even the simple process of using a lift has a whiff of darkness about it: where before your passage between upper and lower floors was a simple trundle, now you're shunted up and down on more primitive technology, slamming to a halt at your destination with a shudder and a clang. Clearly Retro Studios is attempting to make players feel unsettled, uneasy. The attempts are working.



Darker than dark

As if to underline its dark intentions with a big fat dark marker pen, Retro has actually built a dark world, in which a significant proportion of your mission will take place. And it's this aspect that provides the most obvious difference between *Echoes* and its forefather. Via portals placed at certain points you become sucked into this other realm, which is a kind of twisted copy of Aether, the planet upon which the game is based. The backstory has it that, decades ago, a meteor struck this world, opening some kind of dimensional chasm which spewed up a clone. It is not a perfect replica by any means, and, although Aether has its fair share of hostile creatures, the dark world is home to a selection of altogether more deadly specimens.

The game involves travelling between the two realms in a manner reminiscent of *Zelda: A Link To The Past* – or so Retro claims, at least (others have attempted to absorb the essence of Link's third adventure, and yet ten years on no one has ever managed it). Apparently, the shadowy facsimile follows largely the same layout as Aether, but allows you to traverse unique pathways to open up previously inaccessible areas of the light world.

We say apparently because we've yet to see how such ambitions pan out: our journey into the dark realm during Nintendo's presentation of the game is limited to a single level. Nevertheless, it gives a clear indication of what life is like on the other side. And it's not very pleasant.

It is, most obviously, dark. Looking around, you realise that you are protected from the environment by a kind of dome-like bubble of light, generated by a glowing crystal at its centre. Stay within this area and you're fine; move beyond it and the environment gnaws away at your energy like a rampaging, invisible disease. It's possible that acquiring a suit later in the game allows passage through such areas unmolested, but for now you simply need to find another crystal. There's one up ahead; shooting it with your light beam (one of several new weapons) energises it for a period, creating another safe umbrella. And so the level progresses as you traverse it, skipping between domes of light... until you encounter the warrior Ings, beings made up of dark matter capable of transforming themselves into oozing globules, like the contents of a particularly nasty lava lamp.

As you'd expect, your light beam makes relatively short work of these enemies. Equally, your dark beam has the yang to efficiently counter the light world's ying. Like missiles, however, each type of weapon requires ammunition, thus ensuring that their use is measured. Clearly this adds another layer of strategy to the game.

Other beam weapons will also become available as the adventure progresses, but of equal importance will be Samus' new selection of visors. The dark visor simply allows you to see enemies that would otherwise appear invisible in the light world (yes, enemies from the dark side will be capable of making the shift, just like you). Its existence is a natural progression from the original *Prime*'s optical enhancements. Less obvious is the echo visor, which, as its name implies, works on audio signals. Certain types of enemy are capable of attacking with otherwise-invisible waves of sound; with the visor in place you're able to locate incoming assaults and take evasive action. As you'd expect, both of these special modes come with their own visual effects, your surroundings remaining the same but quite different, warped with some dizzying effects courtesy of a developer with a solid grip on how Nintendo's technology really ticks.



The dark beam weapon goes to work on a giant worm boss (hint: attack its mouth with the morph ball). *Prime* veterans will appreciate the updated HUD, which counts down precious beam ammo

Certain types of enemy are capable of attacking with sound; with the visor in place you're able to locate incoming assaults

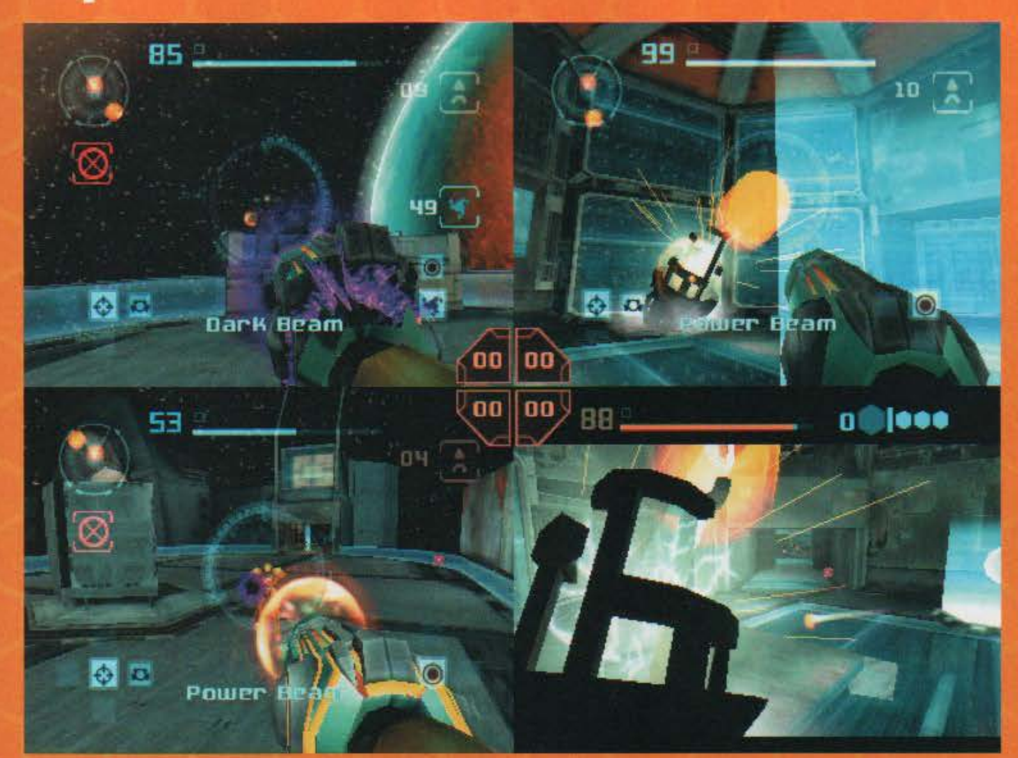


Space pirate commandos are among the tougher grunts in the game, capable of deflecting most beam attacks with shields. Their limited invisibility, meanwhile, necessitates use of the dark visor

The trouble with Metroid

But perhaps we've shot ahead of ourselves. None of this may matter to those who found the original *Prime* just a little too... *distinctive* for their tastes. And quite a few people simply didn't take to Retro's firstperson adventure (it's not a firstperson shooter, remember). Some of these gamers might have been young children who found the game's punishing bosses – and the positioning of save points sometimes necessitating lengthy treks before you

Splitscreen Samus



When Nintendo first showed *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes* at E3 in May, the existence of a multiplayer mode was met with both surprise and consternation. 'How could this ever be a game for more than one person?' went the fanboys' cries. Simply by being entertaining would seem to be the answer.

Nintendo's preview build allowed us access to only one multiplayer level (entitled 'Sidehopper Station', consisting of a smallish, curve-shaped spaceship), but, with four participants, it quickly showed more promise than it has on paper.

Simply locking on to an adversary and unloading your weapon doesn't work for long, since opponents can dash and use their morph balls to break your lock. Combat therefore becomes a ever-changing mix of targeting, re-targeting, chasing, double-jumping, morphing, evading and so on.

Not forgetting collecting. The environment is strewn with pick-ups, from extra-damage add-ons to invisibility packs, each lasting for only a limited time. Chances are, most deathmatch upgrades you've seen in other firstperson games are represented here, it's just that in other firstperson games you can't morph into a ball, roll into a cannon, and be shot from one side of the level to another like a giant pinball.

These matches are won and lost in the traditional style, but Retro has also included Bounty mode, which isn't so much about kills as it is about collecting currency. Each time you hit someone they drop cash tokens, while getting wiped out sees you dropping all of your acquired stash, leaving it ripe for the plucking by nearby opponents. The round ends when the timer runs down or when someone reaches 500 on their cash total. Both modes provide immediate enjoyment, but whether they'll stand up to repeated play over long periods, *GoldenEye* style, clearly remains to be seen.







Cannons (top) provide quick escape routes when you're really up against it – simply assume morph ball mode and roll into their eager receptacles

Morphing, missiles and more

The first *Metroid Prime* resurrected in a 3D space many of the abilities Samus Aran has previously exploited in 2D, so it's little surprise to see Retro Studios further plundering her back catalogue of twists and turns for the sequel.

Key among them is her screw attack. Not only does this allow Samus to assault enemies in a bunched-up whirl of spinning energy, but it opens up new ways of negotiating certain sections of alien architecture. Those familiar with *Super Metroid* and its numerous shafts which at first prompted much scratching of heads as you contemplated how you might ascend them will probably smile when faced with distant prospects whose platforms initially appear unreachable; entering screw-attack mode allows you to spin in mid-air across yawning areas of terrain, immediately bringing you together with that taunting missile power-up.

But there are elements of the previous game that have been given overhauls, too, such as the spider ball, which is no longer restricted to running along prescribed channels. This time around it's possible to cling to various walls, and even surfaces with uneven properties.

Another update over *Prime 1* is the seeker missile, whose ammo can be launched quickly, one after another, without the annoying pause associated with the original's big projectiles.

It adds up to a store of new toys to play around with.



Retro is attempting to make morph-ball sections more three-dimensional than before. Meanwhile, the screw attack (above right) allows new ways of getting around











These energy domes, powered by twinkling crystals, protect you from the dark world's deadly atmosphere. Effects like these look sensational thanks to Retro's superior GameCube nous

could have another pop following a failed encounter – just a little too hard on both the synapses and patience. Others would be those who simply couldn't get along with the game's unique firstperson control method. Others still – perhaps the biggest group – found the amount of backtracking involved in making progress an awkwardly shaped pill to swallow.

From playing *Metroid Prime 2*, we can tell that the first group should find some comfort here. Just a handful of rockets is enough to take out an enemy gun emplacement the size of a phone box whose initial appearance is enough to make you dive for cover, while our end-of-level encounter with Dark Samus – which amusingly begins with the original Aran and her malevolent clone standing off against each other in a scene that seems ripped out of an old John Woo movie – is something of a walkover. No doubt Retro will crank things up a little for the finished game, but everything points to *Echoes* being a more accessible experience.

The second group will be heartened to learn that Retro is looking into providing a dual-stick control method this time around. It only has a few months to incorporate an alternative to the original's unusual left-stick-and-shoulder-buttons setup, but the massive amount of feedback it's received on the topic since *Prime 1* seems certain to be carrying some sway.

No doubt Retro will crank things up for the finished game, but everything points to Echoes being a more accessible experience

As for the third group of dissatisfied customers, well, they may not find the sequel any more tolerable. After all, the *Metroid* series has always been about slapping down mental Post-It notes as you progress and encounter tantalisingly promising new sections whose quirks seem just a little out of reach, then acquiring new abilities and putting them to work on those previously explored areas, so it hardly seems likely that it's going to change now.

One area of refinement that will find favour with everyone is the new approach to scanning. Environmental elements no longer have a central 'hot spot' that needs to be targeted in order to download relevant information; instead, bringing up your scan visor sees anything assessable in the vicinity assume a coloured outline. Aim your view in its direction and you can proceed with capturing data. It's friendlier than before, and certainly quicker.

The small matter of hassle involved in working towards that elusive 100 per cent rating has also been addressed. Whereas previously it wasn't immediately clear where you were at in the grand scheme of things, now the scanning visor brings up its own data readout whenever you're focusing on something that counts towards your completion rate. It's another touch that's evidence of a developer really taking notice of feedback on its work.

The same, but different

To those who adored the first *Prime*, this follow-up seems to stab energetically at all the right buttons. But Retro is also attempting to broaden out the *Metroid* experience, not least with a multiplayer mode (see 'Splitscreen Samus') which, contrary to initial impressions, actually seems to add value to the package rather than being something thrown in for the sake of another tick against a feature on the back of the box.

It's certainly the sort of big game Nintendo needs in the run up to Christmas, what with a certain FPS sequel due on Xbox and another crime spree heading for PS2. But, unlike those games in some respects, it is skewed more towards the fan fraternity, that group who revel in idiosyncrasies rather than allow themselves to be repelled by them.

Echoes has the presentation and production values that are hallmarks of the series (the new music is especially strong), but it's trying hard to break some new ground, too. We look forward to exploring the finished article.





Naturally, charging your various beams is possible, and the effects obviously vary. Unleashing a charged dark beam (left) sees it splash on to nearby surfaces as it homes in on enemies. This puzzle-type section (right) requires the use of the dark visor and seeking missiles to pick out the targets



DARK FORCES

A sequel to KOTOR, but not by BioWare. Will the galaxy's last known Jedi live up to expectations?

Knights Of The Old Republic was such a triumph for BioWare that it's not hard to imagine Doctors Muzkya and Zeschuk sheepishly standing in Skywalker and Solo's places at the conclusion of A New Hope. The game's near-unanimous critical and commercial success meant it was little surprise that a sequel would be announced, but more of one that BioWare would not be involved in development. Except, perhaps, to the PC RPG community, who will have watched fledgling developer Obsidian Entertainment with covetous anticipation.

"We started working on *The Sith Lords* before [BioWare] finished *KOTOR*," explains LucasArts producer **Mike Gallo**. "Obsidian is made up of several industry vets who have created a bunch of great RPGs, and BioWare highly recommended them to us."

Those industry veterans – including *The Sith Lords'* producer **Chris Parker** and lead designer **Chris Avellone** – were formerly part of the nucleus of Black Isle, the studio that, alongside BioWare, resurrected the well-flogged corpse of the PC RPG and reaffirmed it as one of the platform's strongest genres. *The Sith Lords'* handover is a continuation of the working relationship between the developers, which previously produced the *Icewind Dale* series and *Planescape: Torment* from BioWare's Infinity engine. It also sees Obsidian following in BioWare's footsteps in terms of building up to original content, as Parker explains: "As a first game, it's perfect. We probably won't try to do an original IP until our second or third game – it takes a lot of R&D time to develop a world, so getting one handed to you takes a lot of background work out of the process."

Not that the prospect of producing a successor to the original game is any less daunting a workload. Obsidian has chosen not to directly continue the original storyline, instead opening five years after *KOTOR*'s



conclusion, in the twilight of the Republic and the inevitable ascendancy of the Sith. Against this ominous backdrop, the player takes on the role of the galaxy's last known Jedi – hunted by the Sith, disconnected from the Force and ostracised by former allies. It's a dramatic set-up that resonates both with Black Isle-era sensibilities and the brooding menace of The Empire Strikes Back. "We do build upon the foundation of the first game, but in many respects *The Sith Lords* is its own story," says Avellone. "Still, if you have played *KOTOR* you'll get more out of it. And you can expect to see a few familiar faces."

Returning players can also affect *The Sith Lords'* universe with the choices they made during the course of the original game. "We originally planned on scanning the hardware to see if there was a *KOTOR* game and how it ended, but this left too many questions open," says Parker. "Ultimately, we decided to let the player tell us how it ended and use their responses as our data." In conversations during *The Sith Lords'* opening chapter, the player is invited to reverse the storytelling dynamic and describe the fate of *KOTOR*'s protagonist to other characters – producing events later in the game that follow their version of events.

This experimental approach to roleplaying, and the narrative content it drives, is the main focus of Obsidian's work on *The Sith Lords*, though Gallo adds that there will be a number of improvements to game mechanics and interface, from ease-of-use tweaks to significant functional changes. "In general, though, we were all extremely happy with the first game," he says, "so a lot of the underlying 'stuff' will remain untouched."

Providing a less tangibly linear story path is another area Avellone hopes to improve over the original. "We're trying to play around with the roleplaying mechanics to provide more reactivity with your companions, in terms of your behaviour influencing theirs. While there will be chokepoints in the narrative, there will be more branching

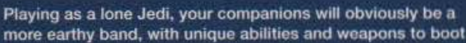




Game: **KOTOR2: The Sith Lords**
Format: **Xbox/PC**
Publisher: **LucasArts**
Developer: **Obsidian Entertainment**
Origin: **US**
Release: **Winter 2004**

Lightsaber duels remain an iconic highlight of the game, and your Jedi will benefit from new animation that sees them progress from Luke Skywalker's earnest but frenzied chopping to the martial artistry displayed in the prequels as they gain experience

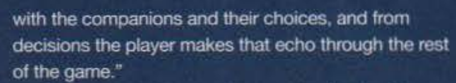



Playing as a lone Jedi, your companions will obviously be a more earthy band, with unique abilities and weapons to boot


THE DEEP END

Avellone feels the factors preventing console RPGs from attaining the depth expected of 'hardcore' PC RPGs are lack of development time and design staff rather than platform or audience: "It takes a lot of effort to add non-linear missions, choices with consequences, and character development and have all those things impact the game itself in a meaningful way. Black Isle would usually have five or six content designers – not counting two or three junior programmers, tech designers and others – working on the deeper RPGs, and a lot of studios don't have that kind of manpower. At Obsidian we've got five designers, and programming support, on *The Sith Lords* – we're trying to keep the same level of depth we had at Black Isle."




with the companions and their choices, and from decisions the player makes that echo through the rest of the game."

Such complex interaction was the defining feature of Avellone's work on *Planescape: Torment*, and *The Sith Lords*' cinematic presentation should serve to strengthen its impact – one of the few criticisms of *Torment*'s narrative being its text-heavy delivery. Fears that working under a canon as obsessively scrutinised as Star Wars would leave little room to creatively manoeuvre are thankfully unfounded. "The amount of source material for the era *The Sith Lords* takes place in only amounts to four to six graphic-novel compilations and some slight mentions in other books and games. There's actually a lot of freedom to develop plotlines and characters, more so than I would have thought," explains Avellone. Similarly, the comparatively rigid moral compass of the Star Wars universe and the edgier explorations of behaviour present in Avellone's scripts are not so far apart. "Star Wars tends to deal with iconistic characters – mentor figure, reluctant hero, bad guys that are clearly bad," Avellone begins, "but if you study the movies, you'll notice that there's actually a lot of room to play with personality and morality in the game. Vader, for example, isn't a simple character: he's got some complex motivations going on behind that mask."



"In general, I think console RPGs consistently deliver more powerful storylines than PC RPGs – I still think Chrono Trigger is one of the best RPGs ever"

All the elements are in place for *The Sith Lords* to be a considerably deeper experience than the original – which will be welcomed by some fans, but could risk upsetting the crossover appeal that *KOTOR* achieved. With many PC gamers openly dismissive of the console RPG as a viable medium for storytelling, it's interesting to find that Avellone is more complimentary: "In general, I think console RPGs consistently deliver more powerful storylines than PC RPGs – I still think *Chrono Trigger* is one of the best RPGs ever. A lot of this is due to the storylines being linear and the characters pre-set, but even so, they tend to use dramatic elements that could easily work in non-linear PC RPGs as well, you just don't see it as much." That said, he admits to being surprised by *KOTOR*'s positive reception among a console audience: "It felt very much like a PC RPG, and I was worried console gamers would freak out. The fact that it did well makes me happy – we'll be keeping the same kind of balance in our game."

KOTOR's second episode looks to continue the rehabilitation of Star Wars gaming from its previously fallow run. Flanked by similarly promising titles like *Republic Commando* and *Star Wars: Battlefront*, there could be no better time for another western RPG powerhouse to make its mark on our grandest space opera. "I hadn't really considered that – I mostly just wanted to pilot an AT-ST and blow up my co-workers," muses Parker. "You're right – it's a good time for Star Wars. We're coming up on Episode III, and *KOTOR* really blew the doors off what a Star Wars game was capable of." The hope is that Obsidian's talent can take us through those doors and into the uncharted vastness beyond.

The moon of Dxun's grasslands and generator towers are the most frequently demonstrated of the new worlds, thus far





MAKING HISTORY

In the mud and rain of a Normandy field, we catch up with Gearbox Software to find out about upcoming WWII shooter Brothers In Arms

The Utah Beach Museum at Sainte-Marie-du-Mont is the answer. It's the answer to all those questions fired at developers about the morality of making wargames. The questions may be expressed in different ways but they always amount to the same thing: How do you feel about turning a painful, traumatic conflict into entertainment?

Randy Pitchford, president of Gearbox Software, uses the Spielberg defence: "We're fulfilling a fantasy, but also retelling a story as authentically as possible. I think it's important that it can remain as a reference piece. Five years ago this would have been too expensive to research, but now the audience is bigger and we can take on projects like this." His enthusiasm for the subject matter and commitment to the project (he spends at least an hour on top of a hill – Hill 30, he tells us – assessing it for the game) gives us hope that his interest in history is not just for the press releases.

The museum is three miles from Utah beach and is in the Normandy town made famous by The Longest Day, the John Wayne movie depicting the descent of paratroopers into a hail of German bullets. A life-sized facsimile of a soldier hangs by a parachute from the church steeple, providing a graphic reminder to tourists of what happened here 60 years ago. Apart from a large American bomber filling up the central hall, it's your typical museum full of artifacts, touchscreen monitors and bored schoolchildren. The kids sidle by, taking little notice of, well, anything. One of them points lazily at a Thompson sub-machine gun while another swings his bag at a fellow pupil to break the tedium. History is not alive here, and even the older visitors look like they've come purely out of a sense of duty.

Bringing this rich history to life for a new generation is only one of Pitchford's objectives; the good news is that *Brothers In*





Randy Pitchford (left) employed ex-Colonel John Antal to advise on military strategy. One of these men has a very firm handshake







Normandy's dawn light has been captured beautifully, and the visuals show a loving detail gleaned from many visits to the area

Arms does detail like no other war game we've encountered. Where *Medal Of Honor Frontline* gives you a prosaic version of the Omaha beach landing (which took place 12 miles from Utah beach) and then veers off into a Boys' Own adventure, *Brothers In Arms* sticks to the broad historical facts. It takes place over an eight-day period and reprises the major conflicts fought by 3rd squad, 3rd platoon of the 502nd airborne division during the invasion.

It's also odd because you get to see the invasion happen from an unusual perspective. As part of a paratrooper division, you land in the fields behind the enemy front line. Your job is to fight your way towards the allied forces, destroying and securing strategic points on the way and thus providing support to the thousands of troops fighting their way up Utah beach.

Your first task, however, is to find your scattered comrades before avoiding detection by the enemy and securing the exits of the four roads leading to the beach. The murkiness of the Normandy countryside coupled with the superb ambient sound effects make for an incredibly tense insertion. Hedgerows loom out of the dark and as you run to take cover from stray bullets pinging around you the sound of your heavy breathing ramps up the tension further. *Brothers In Arms* is not short on atmosphere.

Character building

Many of the higher-ranking soldiers in the game will be modelled on their historical counterparts, right down to facial features, name and accent – but the character you control, Sergeant Baker, and his men will be fictional. This was necessary to allow some artistic freedom but also out of respect for those individuals who fought and died during the Normandy invasion. "*Brothers In Arms* is based on a true story and it's the first action game to really put you on the real battlefields," continues Pitchford. "It's not just a corridor shooter with artwork that places it within a theme like you've played before. *Brothers In Arms* is the first team-based firstperson action game set in the period. It puts you in the boots of a paratrooper for eight days during the most important battle of modern history." Indeed, the 502nd parachute regiment is distinguished as the only squad to participate in every major action of the campaign.

Character texture is brought out through the conversations that take place between Baker and the dozen men under his command. Baker is at first reluctant to face the responsibility of taking young men into battle (a theme also present in Saving Private Ryan) but the other troopers also have to deal with personal issues amid the mess of war as they move from battle to battle. These vignettes are played out with subtlety and should provide even more motivation for astute tactical decision making in the field.





An early mission tasks you with fighting your way to Utah beach to meet up with troops from the landing

Format: **Xbox/PC**
Publisher: **Ubisoft**
Developer: **Gearbox**
Origin: **US**
Release: **Autumn 2004**



A C-47 'Gooney Bird' now rests in the Utah Beach Museum at Saint-Marie-du-Mont. Over 1,000 of these dropped paratroopers behind enemy lines on D-Day



'Veracity' is the word of the day as Pitchford drives around Normandy from one location to another pointing out key areas that appear in the game. He rattles them off with boundless excitement: Purple Heart Lane, Hill 30, Dead Man's Corner, Carentan. Along with eyewitness accounts, delving into archives and dispatching a team to survey the local area, Gearbox also enlisted the help of **Colonel John Antal**, formerly of the US army. Now the company's military and historical director, he travels with us to add tactical depth to Pitchford's exposition of what, why and when.

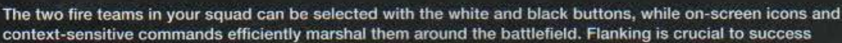
There's little doubt that Gearbox is taking a brave decision by sticking to the historical truth, at least as far as it's outlined in the history books. "Military tactics haven't changed that dramatically over time," Antal tells us. "It's first about finding the enemy, then fixing the enemy, then flanking the enemy. Flanking really means something in this game. If you can attack an enemy from an unexpected direction then you create two things: confusion and fear."

"IT'S FIRST ABOUT FINDING THE ENEMY, THEN FIXING THE ENEMY, THEN FLANKING THE ENEMY"

But won't the focus on historical accuracy compromise the player's freedom? "Actually, recreating the battlefields gives the player more freedom than he's been allowed in the corridor shooters that have come before," argues Pitchford. "On a real battlefield you aren't just funnelled down a path, but you have options about how to proceed tactically. You can charge up the middle, or you can set up for a flanking manoeuvre around one side or another. There are several things that happen by using real battlefields, but mainly it's to give you tactical freedom."

Gearbox's work with the PC version of *Halo* is apt because you can imagine how it could work in a WWII game. Each mission drops you into a battle area and gives you an objective. Unlike most FPSs, there's no tight path channelling you from A to B – battles in *Brothers In Arms* are mainly about the suppression and flanking of an enemy force. Antal explains that it's the most fundamental and powerful manoeuvre in military history. While there will be areas where you're pinned down and movement is restricted, such as Purple Heart Lane, many missions will give you the freedom to change tactics on the fly and the




The two fire teams in your squad can be selected with the white and black buttons, while on-screen icons and context-sensitive commands efficiently marshal them around the battlefield. Flanking is crucial to success






A key strategic location, the house at Dead Man's Corner has barely changed since June 1944

space to outmanoeuvre enemies across large expanses of land. At least that's the theory.

Interestingly, there's also an overhead tactical view that can be triggered by pausing the game. The camera slowly pans out from your position to give you an overview of the field of battle, highlighting both enemy and allied forces. It's a feature that may appear at odds with Gearbox's staunch approach to historical accuracy and tactical realism, but after playtesting Pitchford believes it improves gameplay dramatically. It's reassuring to find a developer keen to incorporate a mechanic for the good of the game even if it does threaten to impinge on the original formula.

Intelligence corps

But is the AI up to the job? There are four levels of sophistication. The first is Simulated Intelligence, based on standard military tactical procedure; the second is Expert Systems, which reacts to environmental obstacles; the third is Situational AI, a state that alters depending on what the enemy is doing and the tactics they employ. The fourth is the most basic: Scripted AI. This doesn't answer anything, of course, until it can be seen working in-game, but hopefully Gearbox's experience with *Halo* should deliver a canny enemy, not afraid to take cover and organise attacks. Pitchford is confident, noting a little wryly that *Halo*'s AI was good "at manoeuvring around boulders and trees."

It's the specificity of *Brothers In Arms* that sets it apart from any other wargame on the market. The forensic approach to data gathering may enhance the experience and make *Brothers In Arms* educational as well as deeply engrossing. It might also prove to be its Achilles' heel. There are two worries with the Gearbox approach: first, the focus on historical accuracy is necessarily time-consuming – will it be a distraction from building balanced and interesting gameplay features? After all, it's much easier to recreate real-world locations and real objectives than it is to make its inhabitants behave in a clever way in combat situations. Second, there's the suspicion that it could turn into a history lecture wrapped up in a FPS engine.

GEARBOX'S FOCUS ON HISTORICAL ACCURACY IS TIME-CONSUMING – WILL IT BE A DISTRACTION?



The weather effects are particularly fetching. Red skies prefigure the bloodshed (above) while the falling rain perfectly captures the melancholic mood (below)









The remains of a German gun emplacement and bunker above Utah beach (top). A stained-glass window in the church in Saint-Marie-du-Mont (above) became a fitting tribute to the paratroopers from 502nd division

So far, we've made little reference to the working game itself, and this is because, so far, there's only been a one-level demo available to play. Yet already there's enough spark and excitement in the situations we've seen to convince us that this is no feeble FPS bolstered by a few extravagant cut-scenes. The tactical directions are not dissimilar to those employed in *Freedom Fighters*: the left trigger brings up context-sensitive commands that you can issue to your two fire teams, while the white button switches between them. You then issue the relevant commands – fall back, engage, suppress, etc. The soldiers under your command will snap to their tasks quickly, and the controls never feel clumsy.

Gearbox also has a broadly realistic view of character mortality. There will be no health bars, magical medical canteens lying conveniently around, or multiple lives. If you do something stupid, you die. Warnings will be given: bullets whizz by your ears followed by flecks of red blood splashing across your vision if you stay out in the open. Failing to respond to these obvious signs by not taking cover and you'll inevitably keel over and die. There are checkpoint markers during each mission but the game teaches you the importance of self-preservation very quickly.

The only thing at odds with Gearbox's approach to 'realism' during battles is its use of suppression meters. Take shots at the Germans and bright red circles appear above their heads. Each red pie is eaten away, *Pikmin*-style, as the enemy come under more fire to indicate that they're pinned down. It's clear and concise shorthand for a new player, but probably too lurid for tactical purists. Fortunately, *Brothers In Arms* does give you the option to switch them off.

But is Pitchford worried that the interest in WWII is waning? After all, just when most other developers have moved on to the Gulf War, Vietnam or fictional conflicts in North Korea, Gearbox is back where the likes of EA was several years ago. "With programmes like Band Of Brothers the mindshare has increased and just a few days ago the D-Day commemorations were happening here," he says confidently. "We want to build games that we can't find anywhere else. *Brothers In Arms* is something Gearbox has been working on for years – we just didn't talk about it until it was getting close to being done."

War and videogames have always been close partners but the relationship has rarely been one of mutual respect. *Brothers In Arms* could change all that, delivering an entertaining and – dare we say the dreaded word – educational videogame. Whatever the case, it's likely to have more impact and be more relevant to a generation of teenagers left cold by relics in a museum. And that can't be a bad thing.



Alert intruder

'Cold in and hot out' – all in a night's work for the light-fingered heroine of slink-action title Stolen, as we learn in a less covert visit to London's Blue52

The Camden-based developer has been keeping quiet on *Stolen* for years, so it's understandable, if daunting, that seven members of the development team are ready to make up for lost time by all talking at once. Still, it would be churlish to complain about too much information when there has been too little for much of the game's life.

Conceived four years ago, and in development for the past two and a half, *Stolen* was outed by European news sites in 2003 as a project supposedly picked up by SCEE on a promising tech demo. It would prove conspicuously absent from successive trade shows until it was reported earlier this year that Sony had dropped the mystery title.

"As a development group making games, we'd never go out with a tech demo: we set up to make games, not technology," refutes Blue52's managing director **Jason Perkins**. "We did get some funding from Sony – at the time they were looking to seed external development in Europe. But the worry for a developer with an original project is that you're going to be fighting for marketing budget, and Hip really liked what we were doing, so it was a no-brainer to go with them."

Hip's recent (re-) announcement of the title (see Alphas, **E**139) has finally lifted *Stolen*'s deep cover, but at a time when stealth is as likely to provoke a groan of resignation as an expectantly held breath.

"The inspiration for the game is the big

Hollywood heist movies – the sneaking, the gadgets," explains Perkins. "When we first came up with the concept there was nothing else that was really using it." Now the game must share the spotlight of a genre with few shadows left unoccupied, but *Stolen*'s hook is reflected in its big-screen muses: this is stealth with a jump-cut, physical urgency. "We're not about passively hiding in shadows and waiting for guards to go past," says producer **Graeme Puttock**, citing a design ethos of 'proactive evasion'.

Prolonged lurking in shadows – or even contact with the floor – is strictly for amateurs in *Stolen*'s near-future-noir. Cat-burgling heroine Anya traverses the rainswept rooftops of Forge City with an easy athleticism that shows up her genre contemporaries as graceless, duck-walking thugs. Indoors, she scrambles up walls, hoists herself along rafters, and springs from shadow to shadow like a caged animal – literally running circles around unsuspecting guards and vaulting or sliding clear of laser tripwires' questing beams.

Acrobatic moves are context sensitive, but lead designer **Bob Churchill** reassures us this is to avoid the sort of multi-button contortions present in *Metal Gear Solid 2*, not as a limiting factor: "It's context-sensitive in the way that it'll happen in the right area, but you'll never see a wall and not be able to climb it, or a ledge that you can't shimmy along." This proves such an open invitation to use every last inch of a room's third dimension that the less-agile inhabitants have required a little executive help, as Puttock recalls: "Originally the first guards carried batons, and we discovered very quickly that due to Anya's athleticism it was easy to stalemate them and leave them stuck beneath you. We armed them, so now at least they can shoot you off."

Refreshingly, Anya herself has no reciprocally lethal response. "We're conscious of the other titles and are deliberately trying to avoid a military feel – there's no stabbing guards or breaking their necks," says project director **Jaid Mindang**. There are, however, ample opportunities to knock them senseless with a surprise punch from the front, a sleeper hold from behind, or to send them spasming to the floor with a taser-like 'neutraliser' dart, but they will recover in time (or when discovered and roused by comrades) and go on the offensive.

"It's kind of an intrinsic part of the gameplay," Mindang continues. "If evasion is something you want the player to engage in, there's got to be a reason why it's better to do that than to just kill everyone." The team hopes to have achieved a balance between brute force never being the ideal solution, but equally never leaving the player backed into a corner that Anya cannot fight her way out of. And, as technical director **Allan Murphy** adds, there's a sensible reason for the non-lethal approach outside of gameplay: "If you went through killing guards in every level, by the end of the game you'd have killed about 40 or 50 people, and then you're a mass-murderer."

And that's just not Anya's style. The



Otherwise-impassable security measures can be briefly shut down by hacking computer terminals. Success in hacking, lockpicking and safecracking requires solving a number of tactile minigames

Game: **Stolen**
Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **Hip Interactive**
Developer: **Blue52**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **March 2005**





purpose here is all of the grand theft with none of the body count: each level focuses on a single, so-called-secure objective, but the player is encouraged to explore and lift targets of opportunity en route. These situations are as often physical puzzles – matching player abilities to environmental cues as was so flamboyantly effected in *Prince Of Persia* – as they are the more familiar territory of playing *Pac-Man* with guard patrols and security cameras. "There's no getting away from the fact that certain mechanics work," says Puttock with regard to the latter, "and that's how it's going to be done until someone comes up with something amazingly different. And then everyone will do it that way for the next three years."

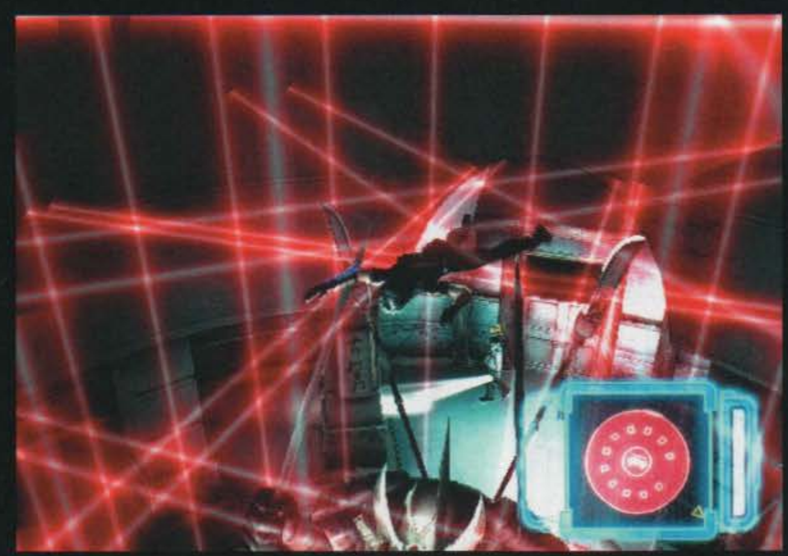
It's unlikely they'll do it with *Stolen*'s visual stylings, though, an appealingly illusory blend of real-world solidity and videogame eccentricity. "The style's certainly evolved through development – it started off quite cartoony, quite manga-like," Mindang begins. "Then the tech came into play," lead artist **Joe Myers** continues, "and suddenly you've got all this realistic lighting, which we didn't have at the start, and that influenced the look."

This interplay between disciplines has continued into the game design itself, as building an 'exaggerated realism' to play off the technical precision of *Stolen*'s light and shadow has steered the team away from modelling a sternly realistic game world. "There've been discussions in the past about things not looking real enough, being too 'gamey'," says Myers, "and in the end we've gone back to putting more 'gamey' things in there." By way of agreement, Perkins refers to the first level's penultimate set-piece, a Mission: Impossible-style free abseil through a cat's cradle of motion sensors: "On the vertical traverse to steal the ruby, there's thousands of lasers, whereas initially we had something that looked artistically correct, with two – one at the top and one at the bottom."

It's apparent even from a fleeting visit that *Stolen* is a smart game – from design decisions as integral as letting you utilise shadows above eye-level, to those as passing but significant as an opening FMV in which all Anya's acrobatics are actually in-game moves. Perkins admits that much of this intelligence comes as the result of painful trial and error: "We'll think: 'That was a really good movie sequence – it should be able to make a really good game sequence', and it turns out it can't. That's been the challenge – and this hasn't been the shortest development in the world – we did develop a lot of stuff that just didn't work as a fun game experience."

Such a critical eye for the final product bodes well for the final stretch of optimising, polishing, and balancing ahead that will determine if these refined and rationalised concepts turn *Stolen* into a flawed gem, or an irresistible payoff. Either outcome has the potential to snatch back the thrill of being able to go everywhere you shouldn't from the joyless clutches of professional assassins.

"If evasion is something you want the player to engage in, there's got to be a reason why it's better to do that than to just kill everyone"





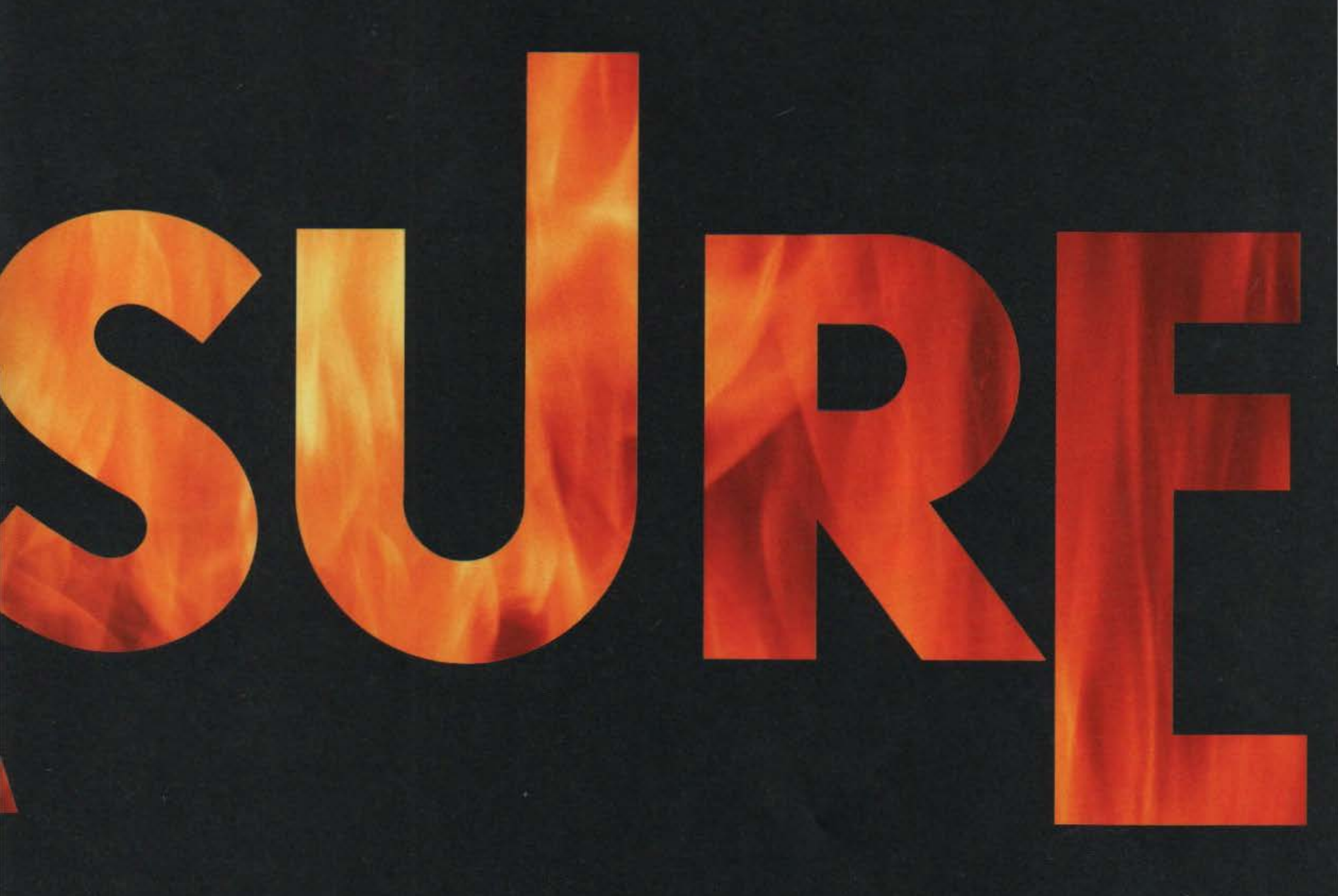
Guards are not automatically displayed on your map: they must be tagged with a tracking dart first. Avoiding them without omniscient help is a matter of listening for their fairly constant audio cues



Blazing squad

The most revered of 'boutique' codeshops, Treasure is in good shape. We paid a visit to see what's going on now, and where it's come from

G*radius V* is the first game Treasure has ever made with a number in its title. Founded in 1992 when it splintered from Konami, the tight-knit team has made 22 games in the last 12 years, each as different as the last. It's this relentless imagination that has made Treasure's name; its dogged anti-commercialism is what's kept that name from becoming common currency. It's hard to think of

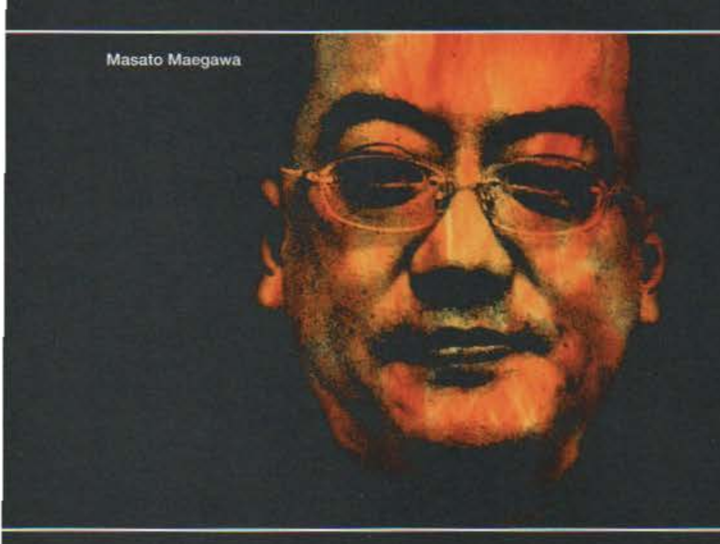


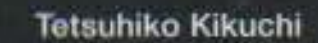
a team working anywhere in the world that is so prolific, so inventive, and capable of such perfection.

But that's only one side of the Treasure coin. The fanboy side, the doubters would say. Here's the other side of it: Treasure has made some stinkers. For every *Ikaruga* there's a *Light Crusader*, for every *Gunstar Heroes* there's a *Silpheed: The Lost Planet*. The sequel argument has always shown how unfounded the company's mythos is: Treasure simply prefers to come up with new names instead of resorting to numbers. Few *Radiant Silvergun* fans will have missed the 'RS2' ident during *Ikaruga*'s majestic start-up. And while many of its ideas are boldly un-massmarket, over the years Treasure has relied on licences from Tiny Toons, Astro Boy and even McDonalds to keep the studio financially secure.

So which is it? Overrated fanboy darling or the last bastion of instinctive, unfettered gaming imagination? A blaze of genius or a squad with ideas bigger than their abilities? This article sets out to answer that question, by time travelling from Treasure's patchy past to its dazzling present (see p94 for our review of *Gradius V*) and uncovering its future plans for *Guardian Heroes Advance*.

Continued


Masato Maegawa



Tetsuhiko Kikuchi


Guardian Heroes always shone in multiplayer. The GBA's link-up capabilities provide enormous potential for coop and competitive play

It's fitting, really. The first thing **Masato Maegawa** (producer of *Guardian Heroes Advance* and a founder member of Treasure) says to us isn't a word but a sound. "Waooo," he begins, as we ask him what lay behind the decision to reinstate the series. "The idea just came naturally. Tetsuhiko Kikuchi [*GHA*'s director] is the man behind the first *Guardian Heroes*. We had to come up with a project for his team and the idea of reviving *Guardian Heroes* seemed pretty obvious. We are often asked why we don't do something on *Gunstar Heroes* instead – it's a very popular licence. I would lie if I said we never thought about it. But, for the moment, it is all about *Guardian Heroes*."

Guardian Heroes was a lavish Saturn production, with subtle controls and elaborate animation. So why the decision to take the game to Game Boy Advance? "When we brought our project to Sega, they told us to make it for a home console. They even proposed to cover the cost of developing the game in 3D. But if we agreed at that stage, we would be still be in the preparation stages for such a game," explains Maegawa, flatly. "When you say 2D, people react negatively. But the problem with 3D is that you need more than ten team members and you need an enormous budget. Our company – we are quite small – is unable to develop a game with such a large number of people. So it's always quite a dilemma." He shrugs. "Making *Guardian Heroes* in 3D with 15 people on a home console would have tested our limits too much."

But isn't it frustrating to have to scale back your ideas? Couldn't you have come up with a 2.5D solution like Capcom's *Viewtiful Joe*? **Tetsuhiko Kikuchi** breaks in: "If I felt like I wanted to make a game like *Viewtiful Joe*, then I would. But I have this belief that 2D can deliver great enjoyment. I don't believe 3D is the only way for gaming. One great thing with the GBA is that each player has his own screen. You don't need to share with anyone – your character is at the centre of this screen. It's especially interesting for multiplayer. This is something I wanted to try." And he has. *GHA* will allow two players to play coop and up to four players to take on one another in a melee.

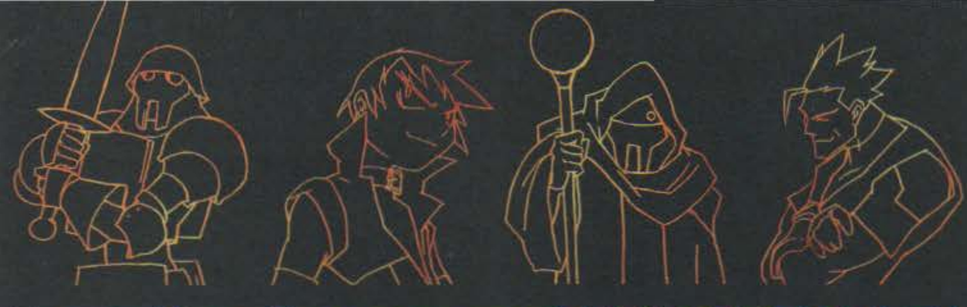
Heroes' evolution

This is by no means the only change that *GHA* will bring. Characters have been radically rebalanced, and a whole new system of bonus features and modes will extend the life of a game you should be able to complete in around an hour. But what about the golden warrior, who watched your back with impregnable cool? Does he make a return? Kikuchi rolls his eyes. "Aaah, this one! Well, he is no more. There is no such invincible character this time. Instead, there is the Hyper Mode. It allows the hero to get incredibly strong. You can turn the situation in your favour just by using it. In the previous *Guardian*, you called for the golden warrior because you were helpless. But this time, when your own power is not sufficient, you power up and continue the fight." Although many will mourn him, it's a shift that should make the game even more dynamic. Combined with a new counter system, it should turn even the most defensive player into a next-generation hero.

"The problem with 3D is that you need more than ten team members and you need an enormous budget"















Treasure's character design, although inevitably reliant on big eyes and spiky hair, has never quite looked like any other company's. Some find them ugly, but the sprites have fantastic articulation and real character. And spindly ankles, usually

Original heroes

Despite being one of its earliest games, *Guardian Heroes* (below) was perhaps a fitting epitaph for the Saturn. It put its faith firmly in 2D gaming, taking 16bit concepts and pushing their sliders up as far as the technology would allow. Using three planes of play for combat gave depth of field without stifling the complexity of combo control so pivotal to a 2D beat 'em up. Crinkle-cut sprites, the common currency of 16bit gaming, filled a screen that buzzed with chaotic scrolling action. The next generation, it seemed, was here.

It's a game that stands up to a modern-day litmus test, drawing a deep acidic red from its combination of gaudy colours and busy, visual imagination. It was *Street Fighter II Turbo* speed dating with *Streets Of Rage* – a thinking man's beat 'em up for anyone able to think with the calm insanity a Treasure game typically demands. It proffered quarter-circle moves, dodges and triple-figure combos to anyone entering the fray of a dozen predatory opponents.

There were welcome brains behind the glorious brawn, too. Sandwiched between each level was an RPG-style upgrade screen, and a three-pronged path of choice of where to go next to continue the fight. Players were accompanied by the golden warrior, a hulking, invincible drone of a sidekick who could be commanded to defend or attack with game-breaking abandon. His presence provided a foil against what was the most cunning enemy tactic in scrolling beat 'em ups of that era – hitting the player from behind while they were hitting someone else. In typical Treasure style, it gave the player a cushion against frustration, at the expense of having to come up with better-equipped enemies instead of lazily relying on blindsided sucker punches to present a challenge.

No imagination was spared, most notable in the four lead characters. Han, a musclebucket with golf-club legs, would set himself on fire in mid-air before cannonballing into the fray. Or angular Ginjurou, who'd spin into battle like some fisty whisk, igniting 20-hit combos with the press of a button before sparking open the heavens with a lightning attack from God's cattle prod.

But, ultimately, the change from 16bit to 32bit was anything but an escalation in technology; it was a paradigm change in the ways that games were made, played and perceived, and it relegated the Saturn's 2D ideals to console history. With the GBA carrying the torch for intense, non-3D gaming, it's fitting that *Guardian Heroes* is being brought to Nintendo's handheld after all.







Treasure's HQ in west Tokyo could hardly be more unassuming. It seems somehow fitting that a repository of so much colour, chaos and movement is hidden within such an anonymous-looking building

After 12 years of experimentation, does the return to *Gradius* and *Guardian Heroes* show that Treasure is trying to bring back its glory days? Kikuchi sets out the company's manifesto: "When you see a Treasure game, you are pretty sure it is going to be quite an experience. 'Waaaaaaa!!' In no time, you are in front of the screen, screaming, reacting to the intensity of the experience. It is our trademark. Another characteristic is the way we develop our games with a very limited number of staff. It is a kind of a policy with us"

Maegawa is wry about the decision to bring back *Guardian Heroes*: "In the current state of the industry, popular characters or licences are more than ever the key for publishers. That is one of the main reasons for the choice of *Guardian Heroes*. If you go original, it is really hard to have your project accepted. We would like to go original, but it's not always possible."

Gradius V and *GHA* also share the trait of being 2D. After *Wario World* and *Dragon Drive: D Master Shot*, is this an acceptance of Treasure's limitations? Maegawa is quick to deny that 2D is the easy way out: "Normally, you have publishers saying 'What? 2D?' But if you say GBA, 2D concepts are easier to present." And once you've won the publisher round, there are still technical challenges. "2D is a very difficult way," Maegawa asserts. "It is not necessarily an easier path compare to 3D. It has its own restrictions. The graphics need a lot of attention, and that means large resources. But with 2D, you are certainly more focused and work faster. When you work on a 3D game, you spend a lot of time and resources on things that don't have direct links with your development. When I see teams working on 3D games and spending such large amounts of time on various issues, I wonder what is the best."

2D, 3D, PSP, DS

So what does that mean for Treasure's future as we face a hardware revolution that looks like taking gaming further away from its 2D roots? Talk turns to Sony's PSP. "The specifications are very close to the PS2," warns Maegawa, "so you need to plan your moves carefully. SCEI wants games to display impressive polygon counts and this increases not just the level of risk you take, but also the amount of resources and the size of the team." After this, he relents: "The wide screen makes shooting games an interesting prospect, and our shoot 'em up staff are quite interested in it." As if that prospect wasn't alluring enough, he has another: "The DS seems much friendlier. You can develop 2D and 3D games for it – Nintendo accepts both. So we could work on this machine as an extension of the GBA."

It seems like the perfect two-pronged Treasure approach: one system to showcase the peerless quality of the company's art, another to cater for its endless innovation.

"When you see a Treasure game, you're sure it is going to be an experience. In no time, you'll be screaming"

Flames and ashes

The simple way to resolve the question of Treasure's place in history is to play its games. However, forming an opinion on the firm isn't as easy as you might think. Often its titles burn so bright that they're hard to see clearly on a first encounter. It can be worth going back to these titles which seem less off-puttingly radical now that the rest of gaming has caught up. Others have dwindled, however, now that the flare of enthusiasm surrounding their release has died down. It's a patchy record, no question, but it's clear from these pages that Treasure deserves its reputation. As long as it's understood that that reputation is one of headlong innovation, not measured excellence. The hardcore gamer's game developer? You suspect it's a title the flexible, open-minded Treasure would disapprove of more than any other.

Radiant Silvergun

Year 1998 **Format** Arcade, Saturn



As famous for being an Ebay darling as a game in its own right, this was a key title in making Treasure's name. Lavishly beautiful, it abandons power-ups, instead giving you immediate access to three weapons with seven combo attacks. Powering them up through use allowed players to survive against the intricate, menacing bosses that filled the skies with fire. With secrets to find and chains to juggle, it set a benchmark for all of Treasure's later work.

Tiny Toons: Buster's Bad Dream

Year 2002 **Format** GBA



Even at its worst – *Buster's Bad Dream* is punishingly bland and banal – Treasure invests a little ingenuity. Team-up attacks and a simple chain-reaction combo system help stave off the tedium and tendon strain.

Silpheed: The Lost Planet

Year 2000 **Format** PlayStation2



What should have been Treasure's triumphant arrival on the new console was seen as a letdown by many. However, the simple, satisfying gameplay and dark, almost disgusting visuals make it worth a look.

Hajime No Ippo: The Fighting

Year 2000 **Format** GBA



The plain-Jane presentation disguises a fighting game of depth and delicacy. Satisfying and subtle combos reward practice, and later opponents require cunning as well as quick wits and resilience.

Wario World

Year 2003, **Format** GameCube

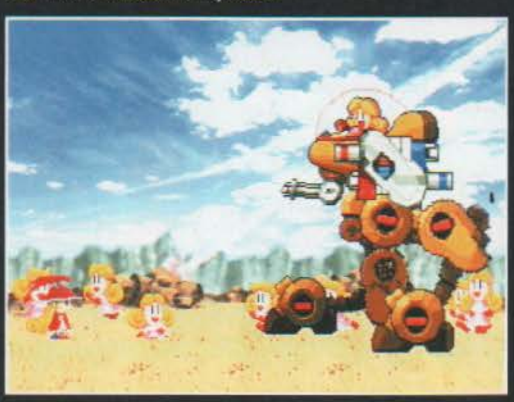


Treasure at its 2D best always, always has a sense of depth, from Shyna's harlequin costume in *Silhouette Mirage* to the tilting platforms in *Dynamite Headdy*. It comes as little surprise, then, to find that Treasure in 3D still has a strong sense of the usefulness of the flat plane.

A 2D platformer through a 3D prism, *Wario World* shows how well Treasure can work with IP that isn't its own. Wario's greedy, brawling swagger permeates every inch of a game populated with typically Treasure baddies. It's not entirely successful, but it has real humour and weight.

Silhouette Mirage

Year 1997 **Format** Saturn, PlayStation



The platforming *Ikaruga*, *Silhouette Mirage* is a masterclass in taking a simple idea to its most complex conclusion. What would be a straightforward jump'n'shoot platform game is twisted around by the introduction of a main character who shoots one colour of bullets when facing left, and another when facing right. Enemies, also coloured, are only vulnerable to the opposite colour and so an already ambitious repertoire of slides, grabs and piledrives is extended with colour-swapping flips and dashes.

Notoriously delayed for its western PSone release, there's no question that this is a game better played in its original Japanese.

Bakuretsu Muteki Bangaioh!

Year 2000 **Format** N64, Dreamcast



Despite *Bangaioh* having been designed around the notion of using the N64 pad the other way round (left hand on the D-pad, right on the stick), the tweaked Dreamcast version is just as irresistible. Intricate 2D puzzles masquerade as a shoot 'em up, requiring players to flip between different shot types and run incredible risks in order to unleash even more incredible destruction.

The two dimensions allow for a vast sense of scale as your tiny pilots fight their way to boss after inevitable boss – some traditionally vicious, some plagued with existential doubts. The script, the manual and the infamous nude KKK loading screen are unmissable.

Dynamite Headdy

Year 1994 **Format** Mega Drive, SNES

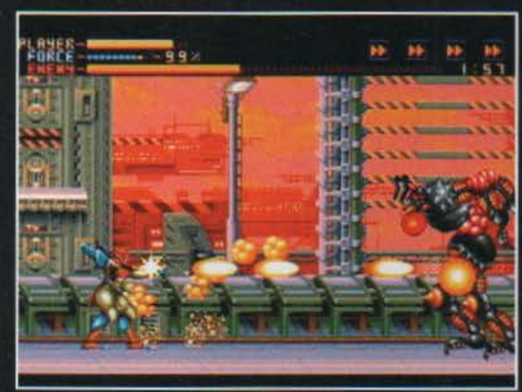


Beating *Rayman* to the limbless punch, *Dynamite Headdy* comes complete with a Swiss Army set of 18 detachable heads, which he can use as weapons, grapples and power-ups. The right head can make him shrink, snooze, stick to walls or erupt with laser fire, a system which invigorates what would otherwise be a basic, boss-heavy platformer.

There are other *Rayman* parallels, but the clearest characteristic they share is the dense, vibrant detail which only 2D can convey. Headdy's world of puppets and backstage theatre sets is recreated with demented imagination and careful, loving precision.

Alien Soldier

Year 1995 **Format** Mega Drive



Building on its earlier success, *Alien Soldier* saw Treasure take the firing styles *Gunstar Heroes* made you choose between and unite them in a single character. Proving there's no excuse for side-scrollers to be lumpen or repetitive, the Alien Soldier blistered his way through corridors of enemies, part *Serious Sam*, part Samus Aran. Overall, the game is formed from a series of boss battles. A Treasure hallmark, there are few developers who seem to understand that if the purpose of bosses is to provide a combination of visual spectacle and gameplay variation, then there had better actually be some visual spectacle and gameplay variation.

Freak Out

Year 2001 **Format** PlayStation2



The premise alone, of a world malleable enough to grab, carried both Treasure and players along on a wave of excitement. Once the wave passes, however, the game's groundwork is limited.

Rakugaki Showtime

Year 1999 **Format** PlayStation



A roundhouse brawler with a difference. Characters, and even weapons, are scribbled into existence as you play, lending an extraordinary vivacity to the bland backgrounds. Jumping, throwing and panicking are the only ways to win the fight.

Astro Boy

Year 2003 **Format** GBA



Treasure comes of age on the GBA. Assured, dramatic and inventive, *Astro Boy* takes the Treasure team back to its side-scrolling, punching'n'gunning roots. An RPG-style power-up system for the pint-sized protagonist and clever hardness settings perfect the game's balance.

Light Crusader

Year 1995 **Format** Mega Drive



When Treasure set out to make an RPG, the easy route would have been to copy the well-defined blueprint of Japanese 16bit adventures. Instead, it took the western path, with isometric views, action combat and ambitious animation. The bold decisions weren't enough to save the game, however. Clumsy in places, tedious in others, it's not surprising that this was an unrepeated experiment.

McDonald's Treasure Land Adventure

Year 1993 **Format** Mega Drive



Treasure's second game and first licence. Better than the branding might have you expect, this amiable platformer almost inclines you to like Ronald McDonald rather than hurl him to his death.

Gunstar Heroes

Year 1993 **Format** Mega Drive



Treasure's first game, *Gunstar Heroes* could hardly have set the new studio a more ambitious manifesto. Alongside subtle, precise controls, customisable weapons and fervent creativity, the game introduced Treasure's signature stamp: bosses with designs to dazzle you, attack patterns to confound you and names to reduce you to helpless, hiccupping laughter. Coop mode lets you share the fun.

Dragon Shot: D Master Drive

Year 2003 **Format** GameCube



Despite its potential to be Treasure's *Panzer Dragoon*, *Dragon Shot* is curiously soulless. For once, the team's talent for elaborate control schemes produced confusion rather than sophistication, and the game lacked spark.

Yu Yu Hakusho: Makyo Toitsusen

Year 1994 **Format** Mega Drive



A not-so-straightforward 2D beat 'em up, this manga licence predates *Guardian Heroes*' combat system. With up to four fighters battling across two planes, twoplayer tag-team games particularly satisfy.

Guardian Heroes

Year 1996 **Format** Saturn



An only occasionally undisputed jewel in Treasure's crown, it's worth remembering how thorough *Guardian Heroes*' brilliance was; both coop play and six-person multiplayer were worthy inclusions.

Sin And Punishment

Year 2000 **Format** N64



It's the opening level that stays strongest in your mind, an abstract world carved from pure, luminescent colour. The controls may seem needlessly complicated by modern conventions, but it enables a 3D shooter that still feels unique and fresh. The plot may not move you, and the visuals haven't aged well, but it's a game that rewards dexterity rather than lightning reactions.

Gradius V

Year 2004 **Format** PlayStation2



You can read our verdict on p94, but there's no question that the combination of Treasure's sensitivity to the game's Konami heritage has blended with its own innovative thinking.

Mischief Makers

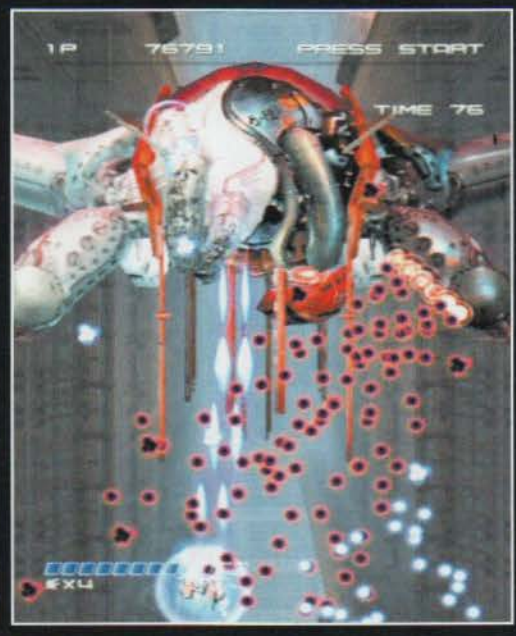
Year 1997 **Format** N64



Nowadays, it's as likely to remind you of *Psi-Ops* as anything else, as you grab and waggle your way around some nasty-looking N64 textures. The surplus of ideas is embarrassingly high as Treasure throws in new devices every other screen. Springs and spinners impede and accelerate your progress, and combat works surprisingly well for a game where you spend so much time cuddling things.

Ikaruga

Year 2002 **Format** Dreamcast, GameCube



For some, its intense austerity is still offputting. The inflexible requirements made on players by the chain-based white-on-black-on-white gameplay is something you either relish or loathe. The knife-edge elegance of the system isn't in doubt, however, as bullets phase from friend to foe and back again.

Ikaruga is also remarkable for its visual design. It's a game that seems conceived as a perfect whole. What could be a game of monochrome tedium blossoms into a battle of colours: white allied to peach and powder blue, black to gleaming ruby and sapphire.

Dust to dust

Treasure may have released only 22 games over the last 12 years, but it has worked on two more that never saw the light of release. *Gunbeat*, a peculiar arcade racer, never made it off the blocks, and our favourite, *Tiny Toons Adventures: Defenders Of The Universe* (below), never got the chance to prove itself a *Rakugaki Showtime* beater.




CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER 2.
MAIN AREAS
(i) COMPETITIONS.
(ii) MATCH TACTICS
(iii) THE MATCH
(iv) TRANSFERS
(v) FINANCES
(vi) BOARD
(vii) MEDIA + SUPPORTERS.
(viii) INJURIES
(ix) CLUB RECORDS
(x) TRAINING.
(xi) FRIENDLIES
(xii) REACTIONS
(xiii) OTHER
match screens text descriptions.
squad we
requirements from a match.
Subs + tactical moves.
tactics.
buying/selling
better values
agents
loans
part exchange
put on the list
player requests
higher wages
Player unhappy
transfer list (view)
Player search
Scouts. Short list.
local player
response to results
sackings
job offers.
rumours.
record results
record sequences.
history in competition
Player records
player confidence
transfer listing
player retirement
regeneration
managers → record
goals → credit to others
Key ratings/calculations
IMMEDIATE WORK
- Team selection.
- Tactics selection.
- The match
- captains, push forw/back.
- Subs + Tactical moves.
How well a player performs a role for a club + whether he is 1st/2nd or 3rd choice
result ratings
Recurring injuries
Store ".rci" in inj structure
- For any injury allocated which
random(50) == 0 set rci to
- When allocating, put a bias
may need to adjust - 'typ'
Spreading injuries _ "Multiple" injuries;
- when allocating a spreading inj
random chance that it will
squad members over the next
- This is done by looking at any
inj. + randomly allocating to
- Make sure pls can't get an injury
lost injury + prevent happening.
- Two codes for plinjd - 1 or 2.
After injury ends, just set typ = 0.
until fitness > 90 say.
- For type 0 injury use 0.70
at end of match as normal.
Also
- Effect of fitness probably hasn't
plpfm, or calcpvals.
WHY IS THIS PRODUCT SO UNIQUE?
Football management strategy games are hardly a new idea. Therefore, any new implementation must surely have some fundamental difference which sets it apart. We have identified the reasons our game is unique;
It has great depth. There are 1500 players in the game, each with two screens of information. Although up to four people can play the game, there are also 150 or so computer-controlled managers 'trying' equally hard to succeed. We have written routines in the program that allow the computer-managers to make decisions about team selection, which players to buy and sell to strengthen their squads, whether to make a sub during a match etc. Each club has it's own squad of 16 to 25 players. There are 80 league clubs. People who have played the game have very often spent ages just flicking through the hundreds of player information screens, looking at the wealth of information available.
The idea of
adds something
It adds
performan
Scenario;
the seaso
and modif
2-1 with a
TIVES SUMMARY
CHAMPIONS
Brothers' play pays off
Championship MANAGER



The beautiful game

At a defining moment in the series' history, we examine the phenomenon of Championship Manager and investigate how this bizarre piece of statistical analysis software seduced the world

For the last decade, a single philosophy has dominated videogame development: mainstream gamers crave the cinematic experience. E3 demos and TV ads now concentrate on CGI sequences spliced together with gruff voiceovers and tense music. Inspired by action-movie trailers, the thinking is: forget depth, go for sensory impact.

But somehow, in the same period, one videogame series has shifted over 4.5 million copies despite having no visuals to speak of, with reams of statistics and with no aspirational lead characters. A game that demands hours of effort but provides no direct control over the action and no single obvious conclusion. This is *Championship Manager*.

The origin of the game puts its creators, **Oliver** and **Paul Collyer**, beside the Darlings and the Olivers in that beguiling sub-section of industry figures populated by bedroom coding brothers who made good. Back in the mid-'80s, the pair were teenagers living in rural Shropshire, or "the middle of nowhere" as they prefer to term it. "We had plenty of time on our hands," remembers Paul. "Home computers were all the rage, and programming could be learned easily. Also we were, and still are, football mad..."

So in 1985 they began coding a football management game named *Champions*, at first on the BBC Micro and later on an Amstrad CPC. In the beginning it was a hobby, with cassettes distributed among school friends. It wasn't until the boys coded an Amiga version in the late-'80s that they began sending copies to publishers.

Famously, EA rejected the code outright. In a letter, which the brothers have kept, an erstwhile publishing exec explains: 'The main reason that we do not think it is suitable is that your game is based on statistics and without any 'live' action the game would not appeal to the audience that we generally sell to'. And, of course, many can still see his point. Only two publishers showed real interest

– small local outfit Thalamus (responsible for C64 titles including *Hunter's Moon* and *Armalyte*) and the far larger Domark. Here, publisher Kris Hall picked up the Collyers' design document from a dusty shelf of unsolicited game ideas, liked the look of it, and contacted the boys for some code.

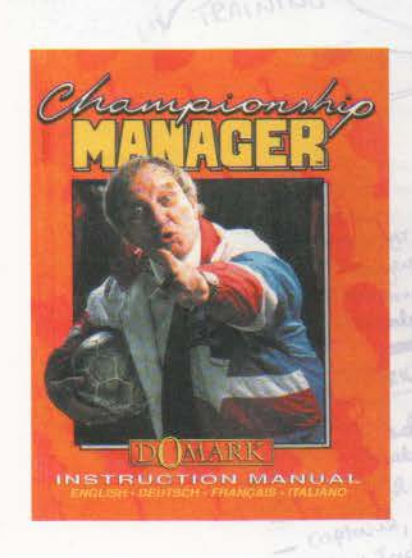
At this stage, Domark was looking to sell just 10-20,000 copies of the game, which was retitled *Championship Manager* (a name Domark owned from the beginning). Indeed, the first *Championship Manager*, released on Amiga and Atari ST in September 1992, was only a modest success with its limited range of fictional players and concentration on English leagues. In 1994, with something more ambitious in mind, the Collyers formed Sports Interactive, began employing staff, and started work on *CM2*. Released on PC in September 1995, this iteration represents the true spiritual and technical ancestor to the modern game, featuring a database of 400 real players, an accurate transfer system, and a faithful reproduction of the football season calendar. A later update of *CM2*, *CM 97/98*, was the top-selling PC game of 1997.

That achievement would soon be dwarfed. With *CM3* and its three season updates released between March 1999 and November 2001, the series became a mainstream phenomenon. Fifty-five thousand copies of *CM3* were sold in the UK in its first week. Celebrity fans like Robbie Williams and Ant and Dec publicly extolled the game's virtues, providing welcome PR. At this point, the database was large (100,000 players), the code was tight and fast, and there was a compelling media element with newspaper stories providing gossip and speculation on transfers and team performances. The interface had also been tweaked to something approaching user-friendliness.

Then came *CM4* – Sports Interactive's Apocalypse Now. Massively ambitious, the title represented a complete rethink and rebuild of the *CM* universe centred on a new 2D match engine – the first graphical representation of football in the series' history. After ten years, *CM* gamers would be able to watch their team in action, view player movement and pinpoint the exact moments when key instructions broke down. But the implementation was a logistical nightmare. "I am sorry to say we underestimated it, and as a result did ourselves no favours with the shape it was in when it finally came out," explains Paul. "I can say right now, we will never do a total rewrite again!"

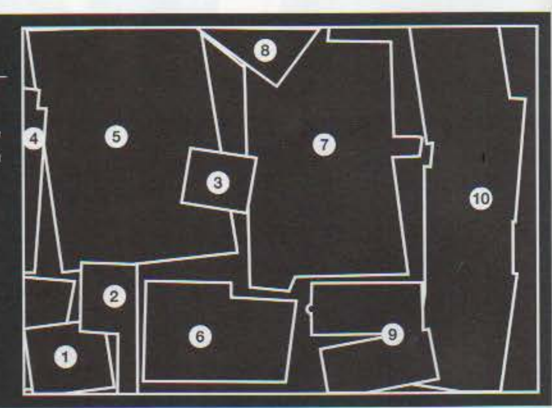
The title was expected in 2002, but arrived in March 2003, the initial release riddled with bugs and running agonisingly slowly on most machines. It took five enhancement packs (downloadable patches with gameplay updates built in) to get the game working to its full potential.

This seemed to have a decisive effect on the relationship between SI and Eidos. In September 2003 the companies announced that their partnership would end after the release of *CM 03/04*. SI would retain the game code and database, Eidos the brand. Plenty of conjecture still surrounds this break-up, the companies themselves semi-humourously citing 'creative differences'. There is, no doubt, an element of truth here. Eidos was perhaps unhappy with the uncompromising complexity of



A manager's scrapbook

1. Paul and Oliver: the early years. Lord knows how this ended up in SI's scrapbook of *CM* history.
2. A local newspaper article covering Domark's signing of *Champ Man*. The story was arranged in a fit of pride by the twins' mother.
3. Oliver (centre) posing with friends around the time of coding *CM2*.
4. Domark sent several letters to the boys bashing out the contract for *CM*. Sales were predicted at 20,000 units.
5. and **7.** Some of Oliver's early plans for *CM2*, including a tantalising glimpse at how the statistical outcome of match encounters were programmed.
6. An early attempt to explain the concept of *European Champions* to sceptical publishers.
8. 'That' rejection letter.
9. Invites to the launch party for *CM2*.
10. Pages from the Collyer brothers' *European Champions* game design document from the early '90s.







The first *CM* offered only a handful of stats and basic visuals, but the fundaments of the gameplay were in place, including a tactics screen (left). Later versions became much more open-ended

Fan power

A major factor in the success of *Championship Manager* is the willingness to foster relations with its fans. Here's how.

1. The scouts

Sports Interactive now has a network of around 2,500 volunteer researchers watching league football in 40 countries. According to Sports Interactive's **Miles Jacobson**, its development was organic: "I was asked to start looking after the UK database due to my work on the unofficial data updates, and also had a network of people who had offered to help out with the updates. Those teams merged together to form the UK team and we used the same process to find the head researchers for other countries, who all build up their own networks in their own countries. It's all down to the community."

2. The online community

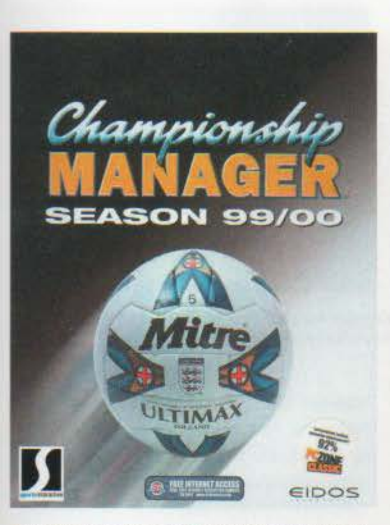
The first unofficial *CM* sites, mailing lists and IRC channels started to crop up in 1995-'96 – there are now hundreds all over the world. Many are simply forum-based, a place to compare tactics, formations and training regimes and to boast about incredible victories. Customisation is also a key element of the *CM* scene. Sites like CMSorted.net offer downloadable updates of *CM* stats, and there are several editors available allowing to users to alter players stats, club finances, etc. Most websites also offer customised versions of the game's interface (aka skins). Many of SI's staff have come from the community. Managing director Miles Jacobson used to produce seasonal data updates in his spare time while working at Food Records.

3. Real-world applications

The 16-year-old son of Bristol Rovers' chief scout **Paul Molesworth** and *CM* were two crucial factors in bringing Robbie Ryan to the Memorial Stadium. Molesworth explained: "I was at home going through a list of potential left-backs when my son [also called Ryan] said: 'What about Robbie Ryan? He's out of contract'. My son had Robbie in his team on *CM*, and knew he was available. I was ready to dismiss the idea at first because I never thought he'd come to us. But I had a cup of tea and thought it over, and then decided we might as well give it a try."



***CM2* upped the player stat count and included match commentary from ITV's Clive Tyldesley**



The *CM* series has always been fleshed out by annual updates. It's a controversial practice

CM4, but the publisher may also have been exasperated by development delays and the bugged initial release. Already having to deal with problems involved in the production of *Tomb Raider: Angel Of Darkness*, the company no doubt longed for a more manageable development partner.

The fifth element

For *CM5*, Eidos set up its own internal team, Beautiful Game Studios – with many of the 30 staff coming from the recently defunct Silicon Dreams – a longtime Eidos partner, and developer of football sims like *UEFA Champions League*. Meanwhile, Sports Interactive acquired the classic *Football Manager* brand, originated by Kevin Toms with his iconic 8bit management sim of the same name. Oliver is back at the company after a long break and working on his own secret project. Paul is coding the match and transfer AI. Both sit in the office among their 50 staff working the same long hours. They are, in some ways, starting all over again.

So how did a game without graphics, a game that requires hours of effort for no visible reward, shift over four million copies? Some of the answers lie in the international obsession with the sport itself. Football fulfils many roles – social, emotional and tribal – yet as far as on-pitch action goes, the supporter is largely impotent. The frustration this leads to can be only too evident – most recently, England's spectacular 2-1 defeat to France in Euro 2004 was followed by sporadic street violence throughout the country. In this context, *CM* fulfils a similar role to fantasy football leagues: it allows fans some kind of totemic control over a sport that may have maddened them for years.

There is a strong element of wish fulfilment, too – the dream of leading a favourite team to glory. And one of the key elements in the success of *Championship Manager* over dozens of rivals is its authenticity, founded in an almost symbiotic relationship with the real game. SI's enormous network of dedicated scouts ensures that player stats for teams all over the world are up to date and unnervingly accurate – even down to youth level. Due to the accelerated nature of *CM* – gamers can

One of the key elements in the success of CM is its authenticity, founded in an almost symbiotic relationship with the real game



With *CM3*, the structure was updated and the player database boosted to 25,000 players

Football Manager 2005

Football Manager 2005 is powered by an evolution of SI's previous football simulation engine. The top-down 2D display is retained, but tweaked to add further tactical options including the ability to define overlapping runs. Users are also able to govern elements such as creative freedom, width and tempo.

Players now exhibit real-life 'preferred moves'. In *FM 2005*, as in real life, Thierry Henry will tend to drift wide and make runs with the ball while Ruud Van Nistlerooy will lurk in the box spending some of his time technically offside. This should allow users to build their tactics around key performers, further bringing the *FM* world in line with real football.

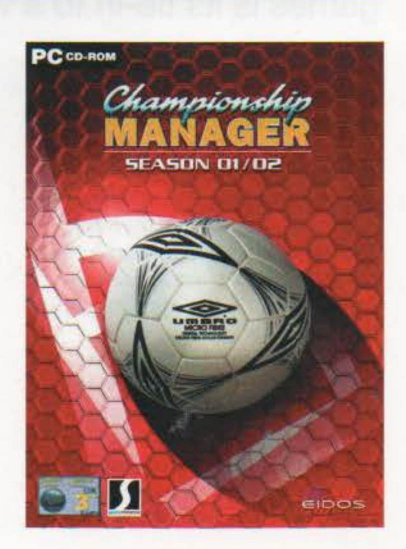
Training has been overhauled again since *03/04* to offer a more user-friendly set-up. Coaching assistance has also been expanded. It's now possible to get your coaches to rate your entire squad, highlighting weak areas around the pitch so you can quickly sort out both a first XI and a back-up formation. This should prove a welcome way of getting through those difficult early months with a new and unfamiliar club.

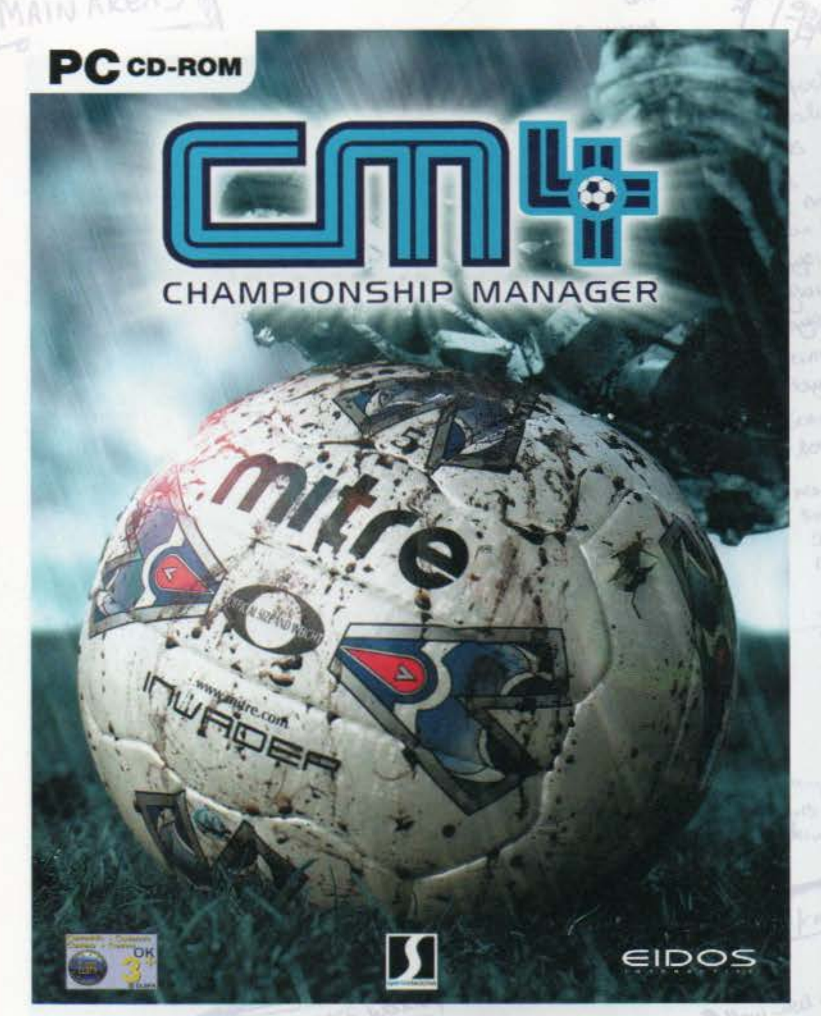
SI is also promising more refinements to the transfer market, adding extra flexibility to the whole loans aspect, which should provide interesting new opportunities for managers at cash-strapped clubs. On that subject there's also an intriguing reflection of the darker elements of the game. Clubs can now go into administration, with chairmen able to sell off prized assets (your best players). SI has also recently teamed up with online injury database www.physioroom.com to offer realistic injury types and recovery periods.

And, adding one last wrinkle, player agents will also be represented in the game, hawking video footage of their clients around the league. And, of course, there's the famed database, which now offers 3,000 teams to manage in 40 countries.

FM 2005, then, looks set to continue the path travelled by *CM4* – towards real intricacy in every area, especially transfers and training – but tempered by more delegation options empowering the coaches and assistant managers. An interesting dichotomy.











The introduction of the 2D match engine in *CM4* revolutionised the tactical element of the game, allowing close scrutiny of player behaviour. Early flaws in the system were cleared up for *CM 03/04*

"It's about taking risks and being rewarded when these pay off. What CM has over other games is its tie-in to a wider football culture"

work through several seasons in a matter of weeks – dozens of players have actually shown their promise in the game way before they emerged in real life. Canny *CM* users spotted the potential of Ajax star Zlatan Ibrahimovic while he was still at Malmo, and Javier Saviola was a big favourite in *CM* before his real-life excellence shone at Barca. Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo are other key examples. It all adds authenticity to the game experience.

The process works in reverse, too. Committed *CM* fans will watch real-life matches – especially during international tournaments – for transfer inspiration, and more often than not these players will perform just as well in the game. "Euro 2004 has influenced me," admits **Daniel Siew**, founder of popular fansite The Project. "Verpakovskis has been added to my Latvian connection at Southampton and seems to be showing the pace that made waves in the group stages..." Again, these experiences are manna to the *CM* gamer – they cement the relationship between the intense fantasy world and the real-life game.

And the relationship is reciprocal, which adds to its allure. Anecdotal evidence suggests that real managers play the game and even consult its comprehensive database. Ex-Poland coach Jerzy Engel once told an interviewer that the best way to train for a career in football management was to play *Championship Manager*. We've also heard that the new coach of a modest international side has recently been in touch with SI, hoping to use the *FM 2005* database to identify talented players for his squad.

Professional players, too, are known to be big fans of the series – Rio Ferdinand, Rui Costa and Gareth Barry are famous examples. The Official Football Manager magazine interviews at least three league players each issue and, for many, *CM* provides an alternative to a round of golf on those long afternoons after training. Interestingly, a majority choose to manage one of the big three clubs and usually buy themselves, and their mates, into the squad. *CM* is about wish fulfilment for them too.

Members of the football world have also contributed directly toward the realism of the game. Sports Interactive employs former Liverpool player Ray Houghton as a technical correspondent (he also plays in SI's five-a-side football team), while Beautiful Games recently signed up Charlton first team coach Mervyn Day for a similar role on *CM5*.

This blurred boundary between real football and *CM*, doubtless a factor in the game's success, has also become a difficult one to traverse for some *CM* addicts. When we spoke to fans of the game several admitted to believing that they were somehow responsible if a young player they had nurtured in *CM* became a success in real life. It's also well known that for every managerial vacancy that comes up in real football, the club will receive dozen of applications from *CM* fanatics hoping to translate their virtual success to the real world. We heard from two Norwegian fans who applied to manage their national side when Nils Johan Semb left. They received courteous rejection letters from Norway's FA.



CM 01/02 expanded the media element and much more. Still a favourite with many fans

These are extreme examples, but it's clear that the accuracy and depth of the game – the fact that fans can wallow in the database for hours uncovering obscure talents – means that the relevancy of *CM* extends beyond the simulated universe and into the real world. **Garry Crawford** is a senior lecturer in social and cultural studies at Sheffield Hallam University, and is currently researching the relationship between *CM* and its fans. He points out: "*CM* helps gamers develop knowledge and understanding of football at a more detailed level, and this is a useful resource which can then be drawn on in conversations and friendship networks, not just around *CM*, but football generally."

Getting it right

CM also gets the range of responsibilities right. In the game, managers look after tactics, scouting and training – not setting the price of pasties or designing stadiums. The transfer market, built around the enormous player database (*Football Manager* will contain stats on over 200,000 players; Beautiful Games has yet to issue figures for *CM5*), is the cornerstone of the series' appeal. It taps into every football supporter's naive belief that their team is only two or three signings from being a championship-winning outfit. The thrill of the chase, the protracted contract negotiations (*CM 03/04* allows for a huge variety of sweeteners, stipulations and get-out clauses) and then the gamble of spending millions to close the deal provides an unusual kind of gaming pleasure to many.

"As with most games, it's about taking risks and being rewarded when these pay off," relates Crawford. "But what *CM* has over other games is its tie-in to a wider football culture. If your gamble pays off in *CM*, it's not just the gamer who profits, but also the team you are managing – even if

Championship Manager 5

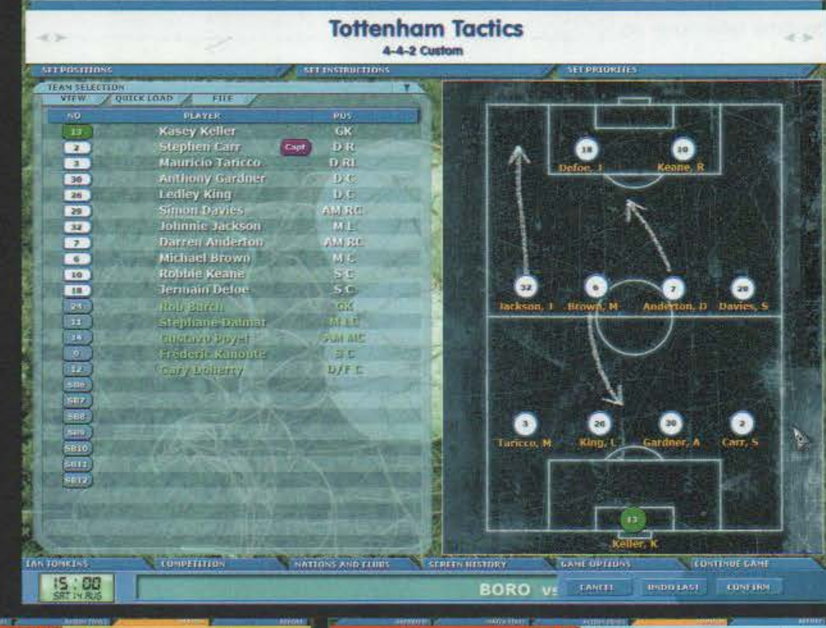
Due for release before Christmas, *CM5* has been written and designed from scratch by a completely new team, Beautiful Game Studios. The gameplay will be familiar to veterans of the series, but now boasts new, more informative scouting, a simplified training element, and a wealth of fresh tactical options. A new 'feeds' element, for example, allows users to intricately set up through-ball manoeuvres, while 'percentage possession displays' allow managers to spot areas of the pitch where their side is particularly weak or strong.

The in-house game engine is apparently superfast – able to calculate the results from several leagues in seconds – even allowing you to play as results are calculated in the background.

According to senior producer **David Rutter**, interface design has also been a priority: "Our lead artist spent a couple of months researching academic studies into user-interface design. Previous *Champ Mans* relied on a surprising amount of unnecessary mouse movement and illogical menu groupings. We've done away with the side bar which has freed up a lot of space, and made sure the groupings make sense."

Rutter is adamant that this is to be no shallow *Champ Man*-lite, no attempt to appease the hyperactive modern gamer. The database remains accurate and enormous – information is being provided by Professional Football System, which compiles similar data for real-life clubs. Everything from media intervention, unpredictable player behaviour and financial meltdowns are, we are assured, still factored into the simulation.

There seems, however, to be a desire within Eidos to return to the halcyon days of *CM 01/02* in terms of gameplay balance. If *CM4* was going too far into complex simulation, perhaps *CM5* will bring the series back to its populist heights. No bad thing, many would say.









it's just at the level of fantasy, this can be hugely rewarding."

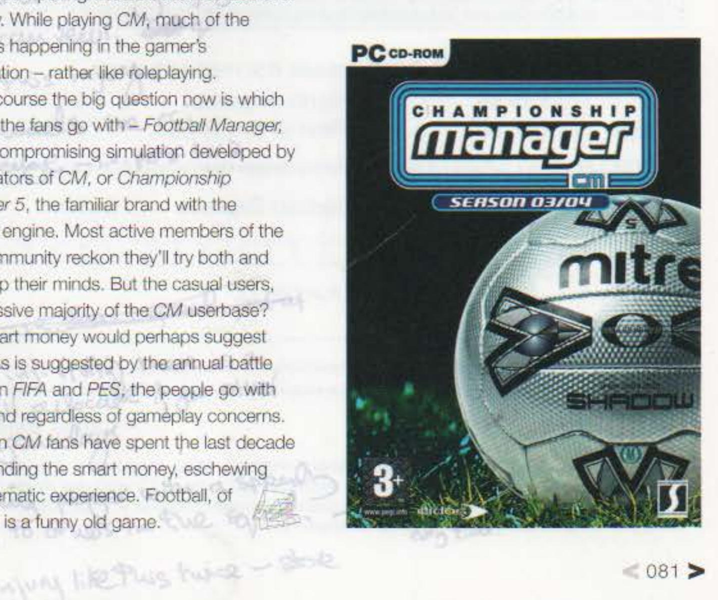
The Collyers are also keen to point out that the sandbox structure of *CM* is of vital importance. "The main thing that has always set our game apart is that we take the approach of creating a football world – modelling competitions, rules and intelligence of managers and players, etc – and then drop the player into this world," says Oliver. "This is as opposed to building the game around the user, or user interface. The effect is to make the user feel like a small part of something much bigger. And this adds to the suspension of disbelief."

In this way, *CM*'s closest relative in traditional videogaming is *Sim City* – both are formless, and lack a definitive endpoint. Both allow users to adopt their own agendas within the simulated world.

Both games are structured around a hyper-accelerated calendar, and this instantly understandable framework provides another clue to the addictive qualities of *Championship Manager*. The game presents the player with a regular, clearly-defined series of 'events' in the shape of matches on a fixture list. These matches are like the drug user's fix, or the gambler's bet – if they go well, the user needs another hit to maintain the dopamine-enriched high; if they go badly, it takes another hit to overcome the disappointment. And because in *CM* the next hit is always rigidly scheduled, it's easy to fall into a 'just one more match' cycle that eats up hours, even days. Eidos has made much of the fact that *CM* has been cited in three divorce cases, but in talking to *CM* users we have uncovered many other stories of lost relationships and failed exams.

But really, *Championship Manager* is about people – not necessarily traditional gamers – who love their sport. And in a culture saturated by football imagery, the fact that the series has survived for so long without compelling visuals becomes less of a mystery. While playing *CM*, much of the action is happening in the gamer's imagination – rather like roleplaying.

Of course the big question now is which title will the fans go with – *Football Manager*, the uncompromising simulation developed by the creators of *CM*, or *Championship Manager 5*, the familiar brand with the speedy engine. Most active members of the *CM* community reckon they'll try both and make up their minds. But the casual users, the massive majority of the *CM* userbase? The smart money would perhaps suggest *CM5*. As is suggested by the annual battle between *FIFA* and *PES*, the people go with the brand regardless of gameplay concerns. But then *CM* fans have spent the last decade confounding the smart money, eschewing the cinematic experience. Football, of course, is a funny old game.







The unreal thing

Epic's Unreal Engine 3 produces truly unreal-looking results. But what does it mean for gaming? We asked its makers all about it

Time never stops, and we are late. Not late as in missing deadlines; today we are late because London is glued up, the tube strike is bringing chaos to the surface, and the cars aren't going anywhere. "'Nother five minutes, mate," says the cab driver, and then returns his eyes to the road. So we collapse back on the seat in frustration, flick through our notes, and think about what we're going to see today. New generation cycle. New generation engine. C'est la vie.

Ten minutes and ten thousand profuse apologies later, we're in the reception of PR stalwart Bastion, waiting for our time with Unreal Engine 3.0 and three of the men responsible for it – Epic's **Mark Rein** (vice president), **Tim Sweeney** (programmer and founder), and **Alan Willard** (level designer). We remember playing their products ten years ago, tiny, polished shareware arcade games. Things have moved on. Time never stops.

Another 15 minutes. We walk into a small, stuffy room with an nVidia-branded PC pumping out heat and technical superiority. Two men are sat next to it. Willard introduces himself and Sweeney, then, as Rein walks in, says: "…And this is John Carmack." If you've ever wondered what an LOL sounds like, it's the sound you're hearing now. This is The Three Stooges, as performed by three 3D pioneers.

Settling down, they prepare for a lengthy Q&A session involving new 3D graphics, firstperson shooters, console gaming, and *Marble Madness*…

Another generation, another engine, then. What's been going on in development?

Sweeney: We've redesigned the rendering tech from the ground up for Direct X 9.0. PixelShader 2.0 is the absolutely minimum graphics model we support. There are gonna be a lot of optimisations in place and lined up for 3.0. And that's just the start – there'll be a 4.0 and we'll go on from there.

Do you think that this cycle of improvement is going to continue forever?

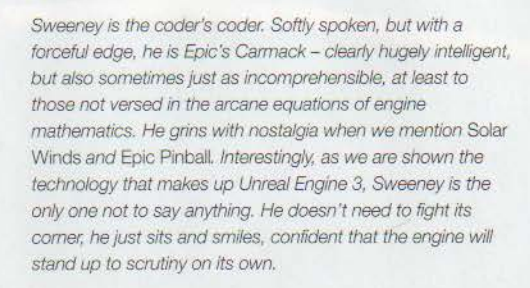
Sweeney: Well, I think it will, actually. GPUs have a load of hard-coded limitations in them right now, in the number of vertex or NURB lines or texture samples or any of these other technical limitations. At some point in the next few years they're going to become computationally complete, where they're going to be able to execute an unlimited number of instructions from memory, and all those hard-code limits become caches. So I think there'll come a point for GPUs, just like there was for CPUs, where they're complete, and from then on additional features are purely for optimisation and don't allow fundamentally new features to be created.

So where does that leave you?

Sweeney: I don't think software is ever going to be done. Really, it's like a CPU. When you've got a CPU with a certain amount of features you can write any program on it. The only question is performance. I think there's a good 20 or 30 years of effort left on the engine side. You're adding new features to improve the realism, and that's going to help you create better, more realistic games. But the hardware problem, that's really close to being solved.

It's not a short-term concern, then.

Sweeney: We figure we've a factor of somewhere between 10,000 and 40,000 to go before we can render scenes that are truly photorealistic. If you look at outdoor scenes with trees and really realistic characters, we've a long way to go. But over my career, since the first game I programmed 12 years ago, we've actually improved by a factor of 10,000 already. So you're really looking at a timeframe of about 15 years before hardware gets where it really needs to be.



Sweeney is the coder's coder. Softly spoken, but with a forceful edge, he is Epic's Carmack – clearly hugely intelligent, but also sometimes just as incomprehensible, at least to those not versed in the arcane equations of engine mathematics. He grins with nostalgia when we mention Solar Winds *and* Epic Pinball. *Interestingly, as we are shown the technology that makes up Unreal Engine 3, Sweeney is the only one not to say anything. He doesn't need to fight its corner, he just sits and smiles, confident that the engine will stand up to scrutiny on its own.*

But Epic doesn't just make engines, it makes games.

Willard: That's right.

And you have to be looking at the evolution from that point of view, too. Obviously in more recent times you've specialised in firstperson shooters, which is an increasingly crowded genre. Where do you think that genre is going?

Willard: Well, I think the age of the tactical shooter, *Counter-Strike* and so on, that's coming to an end. And I don't think anything's really stepped up to take its place yet.

Rein: Why is it coming to an end?

Willard: Because the market's saturated, they've made it to consoles, and the majority of them are on consoles now.

Rein: But that doesn't mean they're ending. They're still gonna be making them.

Willard: No, but I think they…

Sweeney: We don't really know.

[Laughter]

Rein: I mean, I know what we're gonna do. I know we're obviously gonna have better graphics in each game. We're gonna have a much broader emphasis on physics. Tim explained earlier how now we build cars by putting the physics components together and applying real forces to them, as opposed to just faking it which we've done in the past. So you know we're going to have that, we're going to have much better scripting, much more detailed stories. Obviously, the lighting and materials are going to be more realistic, and we'll show you the human head that we have that looks one hundred times better than what people saw in games two years ago, for example. There's no question that we're going to be able to make much better games by having the tools and putting the control directly in the hands of the artist. That's the reason why, at Epic, we've been able to put so much money into the engine side of things. It's the only way we can compete with the really large teams, by having a much more productive team ourselves. And the way to do that is to have better tools than everyone else. So there's no question. I think mod makers are gonna do pretty incredible things, too. I think you'll see more and more mod makers making what were last year's retail-quality games.

"I think there's a good 20 or 30 years of effort left on the engine side. We've a factor of between 30,000 and 40,000 to go before we can render scenes that are truly photorealistic"

Rein is in love with his company's technology. Of course he is: that's Epic's bread and butter. But you'd be hard pressed to find a more enthusiastic evangelist anywhere, his 'ohmygosh' asides leaping from incredible technology to stunning graphics to unmissable games. For the photoshoot, beneath grey skies on Bastion's roof, he puts on a pair of sunglasses. He is self-aware, but not particularly self-conscious. Over lunch we tell a joke, and Rein likes it so much he encourages us to high five him. Non-negotiable. During the tech demo, Rein boasts of the incredible things his engine is capable of, but in a manner that is either unscripted or impressively acted: "Ohmygosh, show him the…" "And when the thing hits the…" "Oh, load up that, you gotta see this…"

What would you say Epic's strengths are, as a company?

Sweeney: Well, we've always had a big focus on tools.

Willard: Tech support.

Sweeney: Tools and support, yeah. Really having a great content pipeline so artists can create game levels, assets, textures, and put them all together. We've always had a much more thorough editor. The view you see of the world is the engine doing a pixel-accurate rendering of what you see in the game. It's a WYSIWYG editing environment, always has been. And now with all the new tools, like the new shader system that lets artists create complicated tools, the gameplay scripting system… it's all about empowering artists and content creators to create better games without being so bottlenecked by programmers, as they have been in the past.

It's a big limiting factor for teams these days. When you've got development teams of 30 to 80 people, it's vital to maximise the productivity of everyone involved. That means artists who can create complete assets and bring them into the game without requiring other people to work with, without requiring programmers to do certain tasks. So really the whole workflow is the big strength of Unreal Engine 3.0.

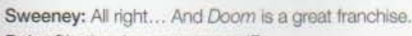
Does id have anything you envy?

Rein: John Carmack.

[Laughter]

Making something Unreal (left to right): Mark Rein, Alan Willard and Tim Sweeney





Sweeney: All right… And *Doom* is a great franchise.
Rein: Oh, they have awesome IP.
Sweeney: It was really the game that introduced the FPS genre ten years ago.
Rein: It certainly startled us. When we looked at their games we were like: 'Oh, we wanna do that!' And I'm sure a lot of other people got careers looking at *Doom* or *Wolfenstein* and thinking the same. Their history is just… we envy that. And their bank account. That's pretty spectacular. Their parking lot. They're a great company; we have a lot of respect for them. It's great when people say: 'You and id are so close'. That was the dream seven or eight years ago. We've been really lucky.

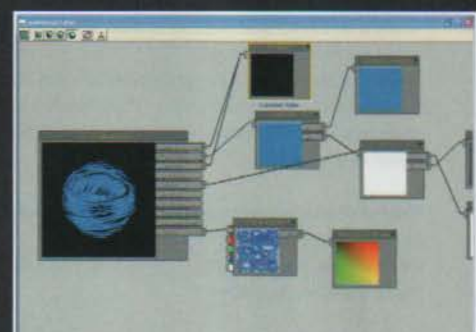
Do you think the 'corridor shooter' is dead?
Willard: No, not at all. *Doom 3*'s gonna ship sometime in the near future, and that looks like it's going to do really well. So clearly there's an attraction in that kind of game.
Rein: As you saw from our demos, we're very much still focused on getting the best visuals we can, indoors or outdoors. There's no question that a lot of people's lives go on indoors. And you have to pay attention to that. It wouldn't be a realistic game if you didn't. That's just not life.
Willard: It's easier to make convincing indoor environments than outdoor…
Sweeney: The amount of detail you need to make a realistic outdoor scene is far beyond 3D cards now. What everyone does is make a rougher approximation than indoors.

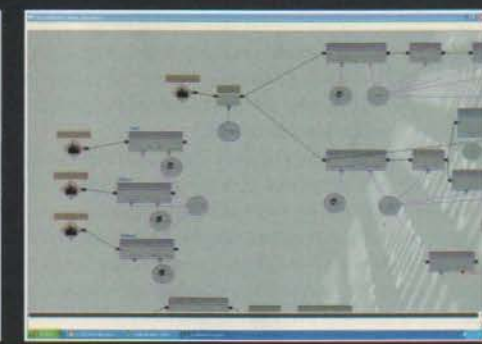
But as soon as technology meant we could approximate outdoor environments, all games moved outdoors. Do you think that games are ever misled by technology?
Willard: Well, yeah, but how much of that was because games wanted to go outdoors, so the hardware…
Rein: And also, if you think about some of the games we all love playing today – *UT 2004*, *Battlefield*… You wanna drive tanks, fly planes, and you probably can't do that indoors… [Laughter] …without breaking stuff. I mean, we've already had a good mix of indoor and outdoor stuff. It's not a lot of fun chasing a character across 12 miles of terrain and shooting him with a flak cannon – you want to bounce it off a wall, chase him up some stairs, corner him… So I think our view of gaming is that you need balance. We want close-up combat and the car chases, things like that.
Willard: But it's a lot easier to build suspense indoors than it is outdoors. And when you're building gameplay elements, it's a lot easier to be in control of the environment.

Willard is laconic Epic. He drifts in and out of the interview – in the brief post-lunch session he's so distracted by his own engine (in which he's painting a model of a head with stained glass) that there's an awkward pause while the other two wait for him to pick up one of our stray questions. If there is a dry quip to be made, he will make it. Otherwise, he is mostly content with dragging out curves of action in his new toy, spraypainting rocks on barren worlds. The demo is Willard's chance to show off. At one point, Rein turns to him and asks him to show us something. You gotta show them that, you gotta… Willard just stops, turns to Rein slowly. "I am doing," he says. Oh. Continue.

You're primarily regarded as a PC company, but how do you feel about console gaming?
Rein: Well, actually, our most successful licensee has done five or six million units on console, and that's *Splinter Cell*. So we're very interested in seeing people use our technology on as many platforms as possible. Unreal Engine 3.0 is very



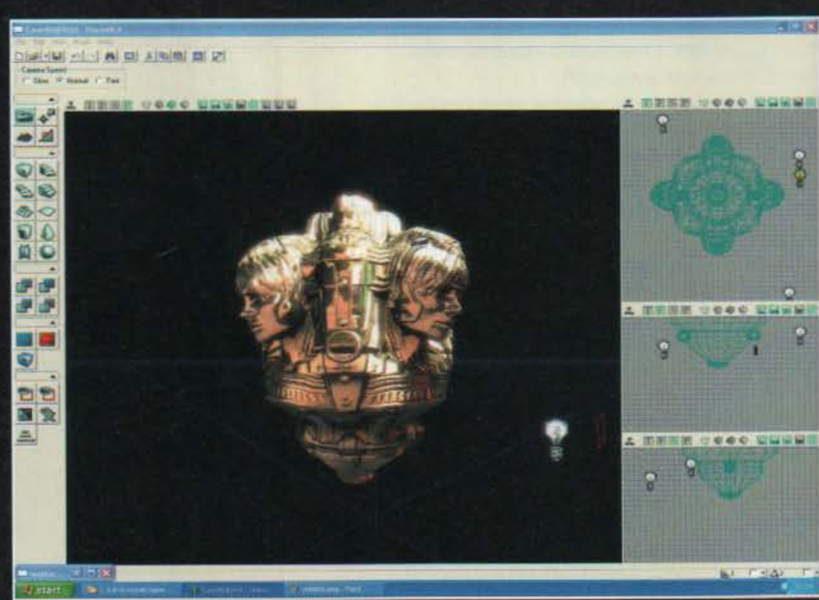






The top priority of Unreal Engine 3 is the tools pipeline, which allows artists to develop complex materials and scripted behaviours (centre images) without the assistance of programmers. Such empowerment is the future of game development





A dynamically lit, normal-mapped character in a complex scene (above); the base art consists of over 200m polygons. The Unreal Editor (right) continues to evolve, adding countless features

much designed for use on next-generation consoles. The feature set, the multithreading stuff, this is very much aimed at high-end PCs, which will be run of the mill by the time we ship – and nVidia will have something even more spectacular then – and next-generation consoles.

We merged with Scion studios. We worked very well with Digital Extremes, a company up in Canada. And we worked with them collaboratively, and it was just really good – whenever we worked together, all in the same place, finishing *Unreal* and the creation of *Unreal Tournament*, we turned out our best work. So we wanted to recapture that down in North Carolina, and started a new studio down the hall from us. We used our clout and influence to get the best-of-breed employees for that company. Then, recently, we were about to move into a new building, and they were about to move offices, and we won't all be together and we'll lose the whole collaborative thing. And we thought: 'We can't do that!' So we went and approached them about merging the two companies, and they really liked the idea.

Anyway, that studio started to make console games. And now they're making *Unreal Championship 2*, and it's fantastic. It's a much better game than we thought it was going to be at the beginning. They're just a great team who've done a fantastic job. And they've also really exercised the technology – the Unreal Engine 2X, the Xbox-specific version of the Unreal Engine 2, is much more optimised than we would have ever made ourselves. It's probably the best-looking game you'll see on Xbox.

Willard: But we're not shy of developing on consoles. There was a version of *UT* on DC, we shipped *UT* as a PS2 launch title, there was the original *Unreal Championship* on Xbox…

Were they developed in-house, though?

Willard: The PS2 *UT* was.

Rein: We have multiple teams, and we're doing all our own franchise work. The *Unreal* games are completely in-house, so we have control over the quality of them. That makes the engine a better cross-platform solution, because the guys working on the games are also working on the engines.

Willard: We have a team who can spend all of their time working on the console stuff, rather than having to worry about the PC side of things.

Rein: And also it's not… it's not inconvenient that consoles are approaching the power of PCs. That's made a big difference. It's just a nice coincidence that they're rising to the power of what we do.

Talking of which, you must be gearing up for a push on to next-generation platforms.

Rein: We are. Everything you've seen here, that's all aimed at next-generation consoles.

What can you tell us about your plans in that area? Have you entered into technology agreements?

Rein: We can't talk about it in specifics, but I mean I think it's well known that we've signed a deal with Microsoft to do some firstparty games with them, and I think you can draw some conclusions about what we're doing.

New franchises?

Rein: Yes. The next game we're doing for Microsoft is not *Unreal*. It uses *Unreal* technology, but it's not *Unreal*.

***Unreal* technology isn't confined to firstperson shooters.**

Rein: And Unreal Engine 3.0 even less so. There's no question that we're getting more and more generalised.

Sweeney: With Unreal Engine 3.0 you could make a firstperson shooter, a thirdperson RPG…

Willard: A bowling game…

Sweeney: You could make a racing game…

Rein: A pinball game!

Sweeney: Anything that has the general rendering patterns of the engine.

There've been some really leftfield things built with your current engine.

Rein: *Marble Madness*! Have you seen *Exolon*?! Let me fire it up here…

[Rein makes to boot up the game]

Sweeney: Um… let's have the interview.

Rein: Oh, OK. We'll show it later. But yeah, there's a *Tetris*, and this, *Exolon*, it's a mod entered in the nVidia million-dollar Make Something Unreal mod contest. And it's like *Xevious*, *Gradius*, those kind of games. Overhead space shooters, from the past, they're great games.

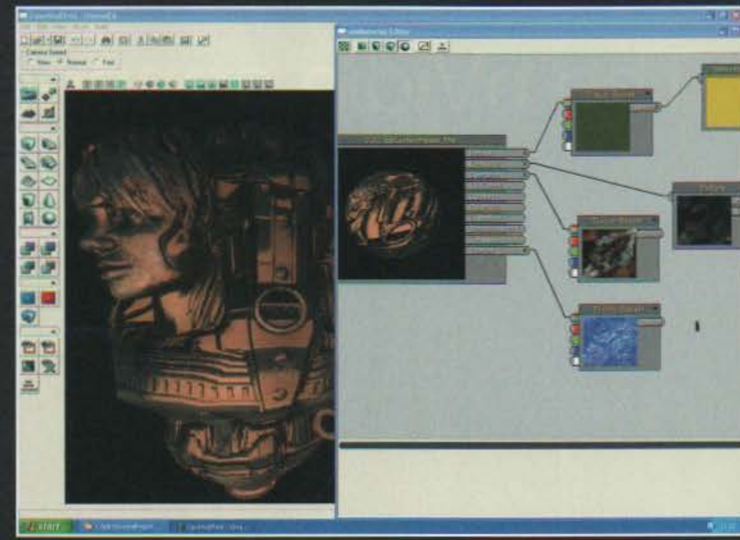
But another very convenient thing for us is that the consoles are delivering much more power than you can use. If you're going to make a boxing game, or a football game, and you don't already have an engine, you'd be crazy not to license our technology. There's no reason why it wouldn't be better than a specifically made engine. In the past, if you wanted to get the most out of a PlayStation or an Xbox or a Dreamcast, you wouldn't get a huge benefit from using Unreal Engine to make a boxing game. Now you do.

"Another convenient thing for us is that consoles are delivering much more power than you can use. If you don't already have an engine, you'd be crazy not to license our technology"

The demonstration of Unreal Engine 3 begins with a wander through a gothic mansion. There's little here that you won't already presume; Unreal Engine 3 is capable of obscenely beautiful things, delicately sculpted environments coated in detailed textures, mapping that can fool the eye into thinking one polygon is hundreds, and lighting to swoon over.

The physics system, too, is as impressive as you'd expect. The main demonstration area for that is a cellar with a fridge; Willard opens the fridge, removes the shelves, flings a ragdoll inside, and then topples over some shelves and crates for good measure, contents spilling everywhere. Everything behaves exactly as you'd expect, smoothly and





Foliage shaders support light transmission, which lets light pass through leaves realistically (left). A dynamically lit statue (above), with a view of its materials in the UnrealEd shadow editor

seamlessly. There are other, smaller demos, too: at one stage the designer loads up a huge tower of Jenga-style blocks and then knocks them over, from every which way, as many times as you'd like. Things tumble, collapse, bounce, fall, slide. Bodies break apart when flung around. The consistency of their joints can be altered. But the real enhancements here – at least, the enhancements that aren't visible in the screenshots, and won't be second-guessed by those who know what time's inexorable progress does to engine technology – are in the construction tools. Put simply, Unreal Engine 3 will allow gamers to build even more spectacular worlds with even greater ease.

How's Make Something Unreal going?

Rein: Well, we've just closed phase three, and we're judging the phase three entrants now, and there are some really great ones. We added a fourth phase – I believe that's in August. Then, after the fourth phase, I believe we're going to choose five, because there are five cash prizes, and then those guys will basically get another couple of months to make the final version of their game. We'll probably post some comments on their mods, public critique, things we like and don't like. And then after a couple of months we'll give out the grand prize, and someone's going to win an Unreal Engine licence.

And they have their choice, too – if they want to commercialise the mod they've done now they can take Unreal Engine 2, if they want to scrap that and work on something for the next gen, they can take Unreal Engine 3. It's gonna be great, and the quality of the mods is just spectacular. There's just some really great stuff, both in the firstperson shooter category and the non-FPS category.

What was the actual motivation behind it?

Rein: Well, a whole bunch of people got their jobs at Epic because they'd worked on mods. One goal is to help people find their way into the business. Another is to help people learn how to use our tools, and hopefully if those people show talent they could be people that we hire, that our licensees hire, that other companies hire that don't use our technology but end up being interested in it because they have the skillset. It's to highlight the people who make these things and give them a little notoriety. And it's also great for *UT2004* because it extends the life of the game – it's making another ten or 20 games for that. So not only do you get the 6Gb of data we've provided, but there's all these other things you can do as well.

Do you think that sometimes, because the *Unreal* brand is so strong, it does your engine a disservice? That people just associate it with firstperson shooters?

Willard: We get that question a lot. We go and talk to people and they say: 'Has anyone made a non-FPS with it?' And we're like: 'All the time'. *Adventure Pinball*, for example.

Rein: Sometimes we're handicapped by our success. But that's OK, and we're going to get that message out.

Willard: The Harry Potter games – they're certainly no firstperson shooters.

Rein: The Harry Potter PC games have sold millions of copies, and they were created using Unreal Engine 1, originally. The current one's Unreal Engine 2.

But you've stuck to fast-paced FPSs. Can you see Epic producing a slower, more thoughtful game – like *Deus Ex*, for example, which also uses Unreal Technology?

Sweeney: I think you'll see a variety of styles from us in the future. We've got a great deal of respect for story-driven singleplayer games. Just because *UT* is a fast action shooter doesn't mean you won't see that sort of thing from us.

Willard: But I'd say the odds of us doing an RPG are significantly lower than other companies.

The feeling among much of the gaming community is that you make engines first and games second.



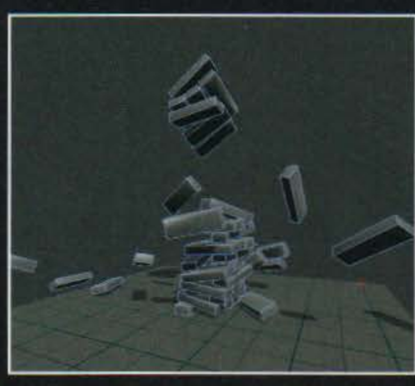
The nVidia connection

Epic's presence in London wasn't born entirely out of altruistic desire to share the joy of Unreal Engine 3.0. Its new engine has been written to take advantage of Pixelshader 3.0 technology, the next-generation standard of hardware shading supported by nVidia's latest high-end graphics cards. More than that, ATI has chosen to omit the technology from its cards, meaning that gamers wanting to get the absolute best from Unreal Engine 3.0 games will have no choice but to buy an nVidia-branded graphics card – specifically the GeForce 6800. All of a sudden, the hardware manufacturer's eagerness to get Epic over the UK to perform some first-hand future evangelism becomes much clearer.

A glance through the 6800's spec sheet reveals details which have the more technically minded of PC graphics whores slavering. CineFX 3.0 shading architecture, 64bit texturing and blending, Intellisample 3.0 technology, Ultrashadow II technology (designed to benefit shadow-heavy games, like *Doom 3*) – all buzzwords and phrases that may mean little to some, but should deeply affect the things they're going to play for many years to come. The hardware might be high-end at the moment, but by the time Unreal Engine 3.0 comes around it'll be well into the traditional PC cycle, slipping gradually into the mainstream as the pricepoint drops and then into obscurity as it is superseded by bigger numbers and even more dramatic phrasing.

Rein also offered much enthusiasm for nVidia's SLI technology during Epic's trip. SLI-capable systems have motherboards that support two PCI Express graphics cards simultaneously, and allow the cards to cooperate effectively and share their workload. As well as exploiting the increased bandwidth offered by PCI Express, the cards communicate using a dedicated high-speed digital interface, and use 'unique software algorithms' to boost speed still further. Rein claims the performance almost doubles as a result, as, evidently, does nVidia's profit from each user who buys into the technology.

But still, it presents a new upgrade path for those who might only want to buy one of the cards for now, and charitable observers could point out that the graphics specialist is reinvesting in the community that supports it. It's the sponsor of Epic's Make Something Unreal competition, in which the mod community is currently competing to win an impressive amount of fast PC hardware and an Unreal Engine licence.



It's not just in graphic realism that Unreal Engine 3 makes strides – a physical simulation component handles dynamic collisions and myriad other effects



Unreal has always handled a variety of indoor and outdoor environments, and Unreal Engine 3 won't disappoint. This scene shows dynamically tesselating normal-mapped terrain, animated foliage, and cloud formations rendered with light functions

Rein: Well, you've got to make engines first, otherwise…

Sure, but in terms of priorities, rather than the sequence in which you construct a game.

Rein: If we don't make good games, nobody's going to buy our engine. The games come first because we make more money making games.

Willard: And also it drives development of the engine.

Rein: And what would you be making an engine for if it wasn't for a game? I think if companies were standalone, if they just made engines, they'd make pretty uninspired stuff. I think even Criterion make games – they're not just an engine company.

Building outdoor environments is as simple as stretching the terrain in the direction you want, Populous*-style (in fact, Rein says that all that you'd need to turn the editor into* Populous *would be hundreds of people milling around). Features for the landscape are applied in the same way one might paint in Photoshop. This is the way artists paint worlds.*

But these aren't textures, polygons being skinned – these are objects, landscape features, each with their own attributes, properties that will define how they interact other objects and players. Everything in Unreal Engine 3 has a flowchart that defines its properties, simple flags and Boolean boxes that take the control over materials previously possessed by programmers and put it back in the hands of the designers. The idea of artists painting worlds is more than just a visual metaphor. It's how Epic sees the future for gaming's creatives. The idea is that they don't have to go to a coder in their team and ask if something's possible. They can just do it themselves.

What's Epic's dream game? You're trying to make the ultimate engine, but what goes on top of that?

Sweeney: If you look at our history, I don't think we have one ultimate game, and then when we make that game we're done. We've made so many different games, and sure, you'll see a lot of *UT*-style games in the future, but we've made pinball games, *Jazz Jackrabbit*, all kinds of things.

But do you see yourself going back to that sort of thing?

Sweeney: Yeah, sure, it's a possibility. I wouldn't rule it out.

Willard: We always have an idea of what our next project's going to be about halfway through our current one. So there's always a sense of: 'I can't wait to get this out of the way so we can move on to the next thing'. We'll always make games that we enjoy playing.

Rein: Even if we look at something and think we can make more doing this. You can't be successful making games you don't want to play. We make games for us.

Sweeney: We make games for people who like the games we make, right?

[Laughter]

Willard: But I get criticised for that all the time. There's one guy on our forum, he says: [adopts bolshy youngster voice] 'Epic don't make games for us, they make games for themselves!' And he's using my quote in his tagline as a negative thing. He just doesn't understand – if you don't love playing the game, you're not gonna have any passion…

But perhaps that's an industry problem – we're all either encouraging or making the games we want to play, and that's why we don't break out of this niche.

Sweeney: That's definitely true. There are very few people like Will Wright who think it'd be cool to make a family simulation game, for example. It's not one of the things that'd

come to the top of my mind. It's definitely a problem. Games are mostly made by young, aggressive males.
Rein: I don't see Will Wright as being aggressive!
Sweeney: Well, he's one of the exceptions, right? We're certainly that kind of type. You don't get a lot of female game developers. We get very, very few [female] resumes.
Willard: Actually, what I've seen is the larger companies, people like EA, they tend to have more, because it's more of a corporate culture. I do a lot of training where I go out and show tips and tricks and things, and I've been amazed at the number of women working there.
Rein: Are they developers, or producers?
Willard: No, they're in development. Programmers and artists. It has a lot to do with the culture of the company. They want less crude content, less blood, less violence.

Has any thirdparty really surprised you with what they've managed to get out of the technology?
Willard: *Splinter Cell* – that was a real surprise.
Sweeney: NCSoft with *Lineage*. Using the Unreal Engine to develop a massively multiplayer game. It's, y'know, one of the most popular games in Korea right now.
Rein: The Harry Potter games. Making a kids' game that's actually a quality, fun game. It's great. There's been a whole bunch – *Shrek 2*, *Brother Bear* – I think it's been surprising how many cool games and different genres there've been.

Do you think many people know *Splinter Cell* was built with Unreal Technology?
Rein: Absolutely. And that's good.

Do you think you're getting the credit you deserve?
Rein: I think most of the developers know, and they're who we license the technology to. I think that if end users can't tell, that's fantastic, because that's exactly what you want. Unreal Engine 3.0 will make it even easier, because it has this general-purpose shader system which makes it very easy for people to stylise games, and make, say, a film-noir game.

Do you think anyone's really going to make a film-noir game, though? Or will they stick with the videogame mainstay of super-realistic blood and guts?
Rein: I think now that it's possible to do that, I think, yeah, they'll start to take chances and experiment. The great breakout games of the business have always been somebody trying something different.
Sweeney: The previous generations' 3D hardware is responsible for the fact that all games look similar. You had a very limited set of rendering options, and artists didn't really have that much control. Now, with DirectX 9.0, every game can truly customise its look, and you'll see a lot of games where the art director, who really cares about the game's look and feel, makes it unique. You can see huge differences between movies, certain differences in saturation, processing, and that's now possible [in games].

Even if it's achievable, will developers take chances?
Rein: Well, we're going to. We're definitely going to have that kind of feel. Band Of Brothers and Saving Private Ryan, they're both perfect examples, where they want to make it feel like you were back in the day, and explosions were going off all around you, and the sky was filled with the pollution from all the explosives.

Were either of those productions taking chances?
Rein: Artistic… no, you're right, but they're stylising them. And I think that's a chance in game development, because you haven't seen that in game development 'til now.
Willard: Because of the way the engine's laid out, it's very easy to change the look and feel by rewriting a couple of shaders. You can do cel shading and things like that because of the accessibility of pixel shaders.
Rein: That *XIII* was cool.
Willard: Yeah. So I think it's going to become much easier for any team to really quickly change the engine so it looks different and try things. It'll be a lot cheaper to try things, rather than having to rewrite the engine. You don't have to do that any more. Write one shader, say use this instead of that, and you're done.

It'd be handy if all gaming's problems came down to the complexity of shaders, but we're not convinced that turning a standard adventure into a noir is as simple as tinting visuals. Still, the point is that Unreal Engine 3.0 allows things to be trialled early and often. Will new forms of game emerge because of it? Possibly not, but it's the best opportunity gaming has of giving designers a clear, simple shot at turning their dreams into pixels. The first company that gets to play with it, of course, is Epic. Providing technology for others was a decision that came out of necessity, not desire.

When you began licensing engines, what were your expectations of the impact it would have on the firm?
Rein: Well, originally it was: 'We need to keep the lights on.' [Chuckles] And Microprose came to us and said: 'Would you license us this technology?' And we said yes! So it really wasn't a big plan, or a big idea. It wasn't something we consciously decided to do, but once we'd started we decided that it was really important that we gave people great support, and that we made games with the technology. Because that's what's going to impress people.

Our big thing is that we never put anything in the technology that we're not actually going to use. We don't have a big list of features that licensees would really like to have – if it's not suitable for one of our games, we're not going to put it in because it can't be torture-tested, or get the rigorous use it needs to be able to perform well. I think that's something we've been really smart about.

"We never put anything in the technology that we're not actually going to use. If it's not suitable for one of our games, we're not going to put it in because it can't be torture-tested"

How important is it to Epic financially?
Rein: Um… it's pretty important. We don't discuss numbers, but people usually overplay the value of it. They think: 'Oh, wow, you must be making more money from licensing', but I think they don't understand how much money a hit game brings in. The real money comes from games; the licensing just helps smooth out the financials in between.
Sweeney: It's great because it makes us financially independent from the publisher. If the publisher screws us over and doesn't pay us for two months then we can get by with licensing. But our pricing is competitive, so we expect to make more money from our games than the engine.

Is being screwed over something you've come to expect from publishers?
Sweeney: Well, we've had really good results with Atari and Microsoft. They've treated us very well. You hear a lot of horror stories from developers, so this is something that's always on my mind, to not be dependent on one financial source.
Rein: The other thing is that the licensing income goes straight back into the engine. So everyone in the company is completely motivated to support the licensing as much as possible. They're just as motivated to see licensees' games come out and do really really well as they are for ours to come out and do really really well.



Edge's review policy

Every issue, **Edge** evaluates the best, most interesting, hyped, innovative or promising games on a scale of ten, where five naturally represents the middle value. **Edge's** rating system is fair, progressive and balanced. An average game deserves an average mark – not, as many believe, seven out of ten. Scores broadly correspond to the following sentiments: zero: nothing, one: disastrous, two: appalling, three: severely flawed, four: disappointing, five: average, six: competent, seven: distinguished, eight: excellent, nine: astounding, ten: revolutionary.

Edge's most played

Silent Hill 3

After the confused fourth title, replaying this self-aware, Lynchian road trip to hell reveals a team at the height of their confidence – and some fresh shocks.



(PS2) Konami

Vagrant Story

Matsuno's love-or-hate epic takes on a new light when seen as a precursor to *Final Fantasy XII*. It's a shame *VS* never had an *FF*-sized budget, though.



(PS1) Square

Metroid Prime

A trip back to the Samus' first GC adventure was essential this month. And it's aged well, not least in terms of its graphics, which positively glisten.



(GC) Nintendo

Call Of Duty

The singleplayer game was exhausted many moons ago, of course, but high-turnover deathmatches give the authentic-feeling title an added level of wow.



(PC) Activision

testscreen

The world's most respected videogame reviews

Holding R2 for a hero

Why supermen shrink as games grow

All game characters are superheroes, able to leap tall buildings in a single double-jump and run faster than a speeding loading bar. Is it a girl with big breasts and tight shorts, is it a plain old gun-toting grizzler? Well, yes, most likely. Even games which take pains to stress the ordinariness of their heroes – such as *SOS: The Final Escape* – are compromised with magical save points and wounds that can be healed with tepid drinking water.

It's what makes superhero games so hard to do well. How can they not disappoint after generations of developers have raised gamers' expectations so systematically? It's not easy to impress. Superman may be a benchmark of unbeatableness, but you still wouldn't back him in a fight with Samus Aran. Is there anyone who really thinks Batman could take out Master Chief? Yet their kind of heroics are gaming's bread and butter. Indeed, they don't often get called heroes, let alone super ones. So when someone swoops in from a skylight and makes claims to deserve their own illustrated monthly pamphlet, it's inevitable that we're sceptical.

Where Spider-Man succeeds so surprisingly is that he convincingly out-supers the gaming competition. The scale and speed of his movement is an order of magnitude beyond the competition's. Treyarch has managed to establish some clear blue water between its hero and those of 'ordinary' games. No Persian prince has swung from flag to flag with such abandon. Ryu Hayabusa (below) can only dream of scampering so high. Captain Rhama never met a 102-storey skyscraper – and if he had, his camera probably wouldn't have coped.

But having a superhero doesn't necessarily make a super game. Moulding the capabilities of a central character doesn't get you very far on its own. Saving the world may be satisfying in the movies, but in games we need to change it in order to feel believably immersed. Which means that without a world for him to act in, and tasks that tie him to it, a gaming superhero might as well stick to his day job. Perhaps games should start a fight-back, and go on the offensive with their own brand of superness. A spider that got bitten by a radioactive Mario? Now there's a movie worth queuing for.





094



096



098



100



102

Gradius V

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Konami** Developer: **Treasure** Price: **¥5,800 (£30)** Release: **Out Now (Japan) September (UK)**





Gradius V is more omnidirectional than previous iterations of the saga. It forces you to make on-the-fly changes to your weapon set-up depending on the challenge





Treasure has plundered and upgraded ideas from most of the other games in the series, but it's *Salamander* that gets the biggest nod. Newcomers to the series won't feel drowned in nostalgia, however, as the result is entirely fres

Neglected beast, the horizontal shooter. Outside of *Border Down* and *R-Type Final*, left-to-right shmups have gradually been shuffled out to pasture, making way for glossy upstarts like *Ikaruga* and *Psyvariar 2*.

Gradius V arrives like a blast of hot boss explosion, lobbing a cheeky depth-charge up the rear of an increasingly stale genre. For a start, Mr Vic Viper now has a few new outfits. Stick to a classic power-up spread (speed, missile, double, laser, option, shield) if you like, but, unlike previous *Gradius* games, you won't be able to languish in the multiple-laser comfort zone forever. Depending on the environment, there's plenty of on-the-fly mixing and matching – with even the much-neglected double playing a part.

Gradius V arrives like a blast of hot boss explosion, lobbing a cheeky depth-charge up the rear of an increasingly stale genre



Multi-segmented bosses are a new addition. Take too long to suss out the patterns, and they get even angrier

The biggest joy of *Gradius V* is that it's equally regressive and progressive. It's utterly and completely *now*, but also respectful of its elders in look and, most importantly, feel. Rather than over-produce some flashy remake, Treasure has ladled on cosmetics without losing sight of what made the game so great in the first place: the muscle memory of hammering those first few waves of option-spawning bad guys; smugly taking on motherships while squeezing through the middle of their laser bursts; running a tense line between score-maximising and survival.

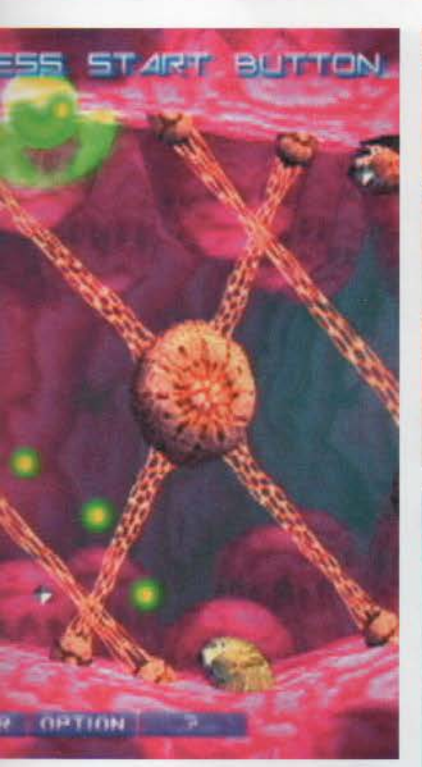
The big issue here – and the series' perennial flaw – is the way the Vic sheds all those hard-earned power-ups on death. Treasure's solution is pretty workable. If you activate Revival Start, you'll be bumped back to the beginning of the section, classic style. Otherwise, the options are scattered in a friendly cluster, with only speed, missile and lasers being lost – as in *Salamander*. Not perfect, but much more lenient punishment than leaving you naked and sluggish with only the default pea-shooter for protection.

What's so refreshing is the way the game effortlessly revels in itself. It's forever tweaking and subverting the format by fiddling with gravity and physics. The action creeps up slowly, starting out like a gorgeous-looking but fairly standard shoot 'em up. However, by the middle of level two, it's pummelling you with a relentless parade of conceptual set-pieces so audacious and inventive you'll laugh with delight as you gape in horror.

There's a crowd-pleasing, old-school 2D *Salamander* homage level, a section where you're chased by a glooping cascade of toxic goo which perfectly obeys the lurching and listing surroundings, a blizzard of asteroids that takes point-whoring to a new level of hysteria, and an area with organic terrain that swells and undulates, leaving only the tiniest of gaps for the ship to squeeze through.

And then… the *bosses*. A gigantic spider mech – inspired by the *Parodius* can-can girl – whose laser forces you to hide behind sections of scenery which topple treacherously when zapped. There's the multi-geometric hell of being trapped inside a spinning cage, lined with angry missile batteries, while a big pinball robot clatters off the walls. There's even a wonderfully cheeky boss-rush of original *Gradius* motherships – no way through but to destroy everything. It's

Previously in E121, E125, E138







Twoplayer is supremely satisfying, with players scooping up each other's options whenever someone dies – which may be often




as if Treasure is telling us those old-school bosses were all well and good, but compared to the stuff that can be done now, they're practically standard enemies. Boss defeats are rewarded with the customary apocalyptic, slo-mo money-shot detonations – and it's not all girders or metal. The way the icky level four boss quivers and squelches before rupturing in an almighty hail of flatulence is a sight – and sound – to behold.

The obligatory stage-select system rewards the player with rehearsable areas based on how far they get in standard mode. You'll need them. This is a game shamelessly tailored to hardcore shmuppers, with moments of mind-bending bullet-hell intensity only comparable to the likes of *DoDonPachi* or *Ikaruga* at its most obnoxious. Thankfully, there's a good span of difficulty levels, with the only differences being the number of bullets flying around. Very Easy is a perfectly good way of easing yourself in before clambering all the way up to Normal. Very Hard is, naturally, hilarious.

Still, overall, the difficulty *is* high. But, as with any good shooter, it's all about playing it gung-ho: spotting the pixel-perfect gaps to slip through, jinking around the weeniest let-ups in the bullet flurry, having the guile to spy and settle into a sweet spot, and the gall to take the fight to the game.

Coop twoplayer is a well-balanced blast, and it's more of a collaborative effort than the usual greed-is-good style. Unlike *Ikaruga*, it doesn't feel tacked on or counter-productive.

Disappointments are mostly nit-picky and subjective. With this much out-and-out fun to be had, only the most churlish will note that the story and cut-scenes are hardly gripping. The enemy bullets could be a little more clearly defined, and, no, the Easter Island statues aren't in there.

Treasure has clearly set out to pay tribute to a classic series, while giving the whole shmup concept a bit of a makeover in the process. Job well and truly done.

Edge rating: Nine out of ten

Vic 'n' mix

There are four default configs and a custom mode so you can mash together a ship more to your taste. Missile tweaks include Eagle Wind – where two torpedoes spread off in opposite directions. There's now a double tailgun, *Salamander*'s ripple laser, and a fancy-looking but deeply useless flamethrower. There's also the option to use the classic front shield, an all-round force field or a Mega Crash (instant smart bomb).

The most radical change is in option control. Now, you can stick to standard *Gradius*, lock the options in a single position, have them rotate, or go for the tricky but devastating directional control where the right stick is used to aim.

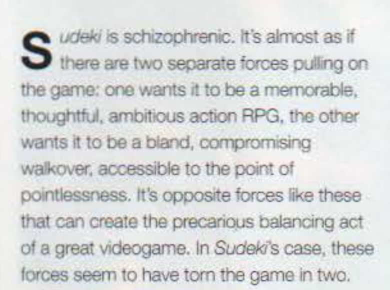
Sudeki

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Microsoft** Developer: **Climax** Price: **£40** Release: **August 27**



Sudeki's fire-lit, silhouetted stick-puppet intro is typical of the game's beauty, impressively recounting an otherwise hokey RPG story of mischievous gods and worlds torn in two





Sudeki is schizophrenic. It's almost as if there are two separate forces pulling on the game: one wants it to be a memorable, thoughtful, ambitious action RPG, the other wants it to be a bland, compromising walkover, accessible to the point of pointlessness. It's opposite forces like these that can create the precarious balancing act of a great videogame. In *Sudeki*'s case, these forces seem to have torn the game in two.

The lead characters are abysmally designed. Waxen, ugly and uninspired, with more than a whiff of committee behind them, they're the most dislikeable aspect of an otherwise magnificent world. Characters aside, *Sudeki* features a prodigious level of art direction and imagination. Witness benevolent god Testu, who appears at several key points, a living light show carved from gems. Or the tavern in the hi-tech city of Transentia, where the bar taps have been replaced with a complex arrangement of cogs and shafts. Even the glorious armour sported by the characters is a candied, textured treat. Unlike its lead character design, *Sudeki*'s look is one of abundant colour, solidity and majesty, much like *Skies Of Arcadia* or *Dark Chronicle*. The biggest compulsion behind playing the game is in seeing what grand scenes await around the next corner, to be lapped up and ogled via a switch to firstperson viewpoint.





Sudeki is constantly, blissfully pretty. The cottages and lanes seem to be carved out of sweets; eye candy indeed

The biggest compulsion behind playing Sudeki is in seeing what grand scenes await around the next corner, to be lapped up and ogled

More schizophrenia: *Sudeki*'s range of voice-acted accents is more than just a melting pot; it's like some Eurovision Dialogue Contest where no stereotype is left unrepresented. Strong regional accents sat ill among Rare's more fantastic creature-led games, but here they're far more awkward and sometimes embarrassing. And while the script is bearable, pivotal plot events are handled clumsily. Otherwise, though, the ambience and plucked-guitar music lend the game an air that complements the substantial, captivating game world.

And more schizophrenia: *Sudeki*'s combat is ambitious, chaotic and multi-layered. Its puzzles are anything but. Fights aren't random, but they are unavoidable. Each location has a number of danger zones, and entering these areas will almost always result in a fight, sometimes even if you've just exited one by a few steps and decide to double back on yourself. Half of your team fight in thirdperson, using melee weapons and combos. This style of fighting feels slightly sticky and cumbersome, but still makes for a decent system. The other half of your team attacks via firstperson, firing magic and projectile weapons into the fray. This is the most engaging facet of *Sudeki*'s battles, bringing with it the flexibility and satisfaction of attack associated with firstperson combat. The chaos of the fighting is welcome, but it does highlight just how incapable your teammates are of looking after themselves. Until they become sufficiently powerful, it's best to set their AI to 'defend' while you

The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay

Previously in E117, E125, E136













Defeat an enemy with a particularly powerful blow, and they'll explode into a shower of blood, but such gratuitous gore feels jarring





perform most of the offensive duties. Levelling up allows you to cultivate one of two approaches: bolstering your character's power and health, or increasing the efficacy and number of special attacks.

The puzzles and tasks that intersperse the combat, however, are thoughtless and menial. They're beyond pushovers – they're non-existent. Each character has an ability so generic it could almost be some kind of ironic punishment for their dull appearance: one can push crates, one can climb up obvious wall textures, one can glide across gaps, and one can dispel magically concealed objects to make them appear. The puzzles are so unintelligent that knowing these powers alone is enough to solve them. And some of the crate-nudging sections in the latter half of the game are very nearly an insult for a title that's so sophisticated in many other ways. Appreciable effort has also gone into the representing the light/dark world duality of *Sudeki*, but no use is made of it to proffer anything in terms of the kind of beautifully intricate befuddlement of *A Link To The Past*.

Less absent-minded game design and more faith in complexity to complement the boisterous and involving combat would have meant *Sudeki* wouldn't have been so barely above average. It's a game that's been lavished and loved in some areas, and inexplicably deprived in others. It's no surprise, then, that the end result has such a split personality.

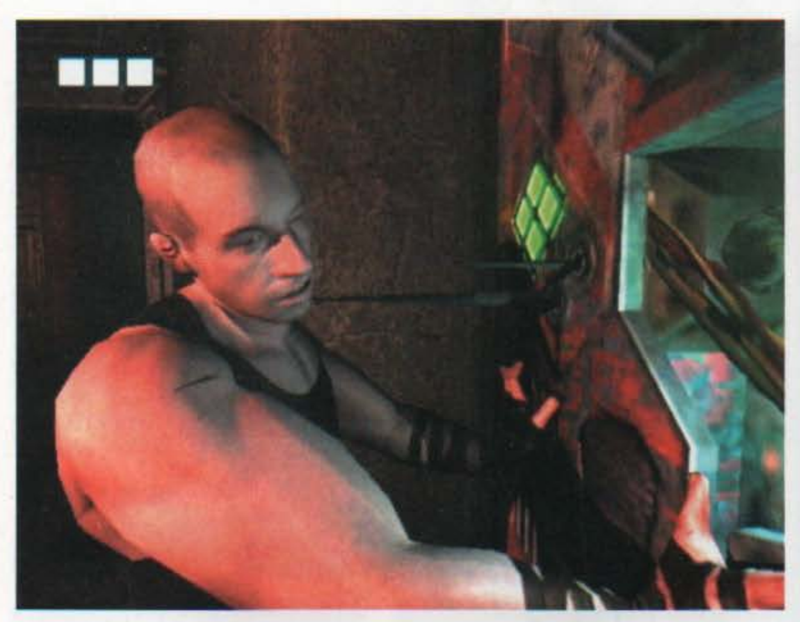
Edge rating: Six out of ten

Posse galore

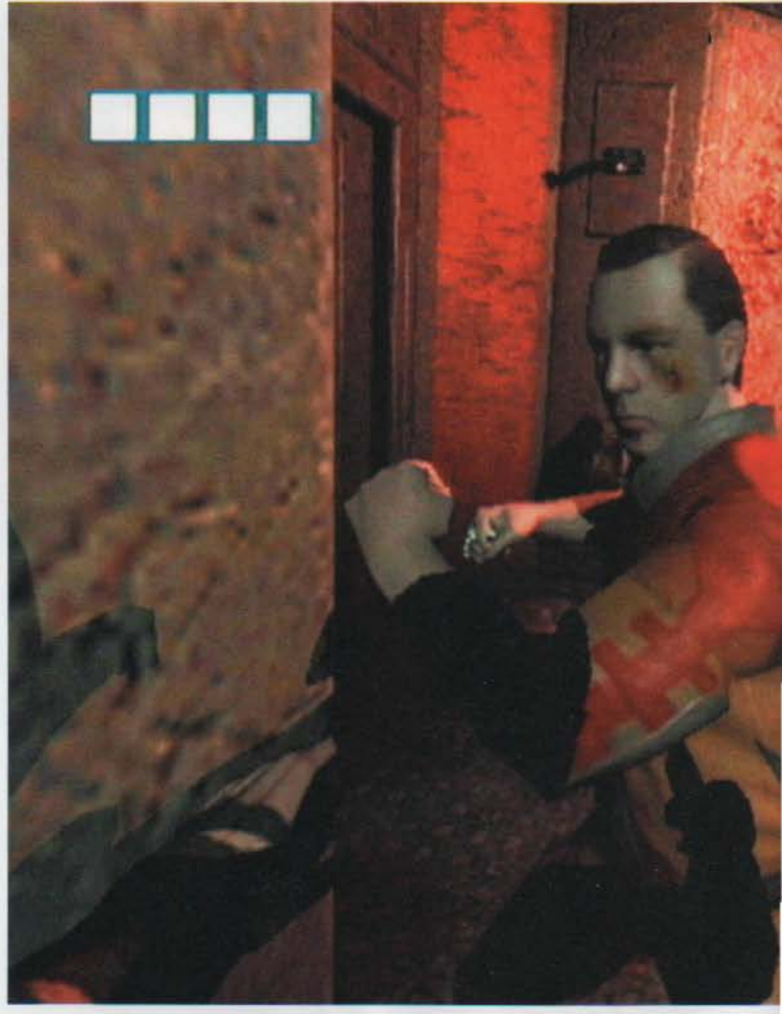
Switching between characters is a fluid and simple feat, a feature that comes into its own during the heat of combat. Boss battles, however, are fought one on one, with the plot choosing which member of your team goes up against a suitably climactic leviathan. This is a welcome idea, but one that's left typically unexplored as most boss fights seem to feature little else but repetition: identify weak spot, attack, hide from vicious counterattack and repeat until you've whittled yourself numb.

The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Vivendi Universal** Developer: **Starbreeze** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now (US) August 13 (UK)**



'Vin Diesel's likeness!' boasts the feature list on the back of the box. It's an oddly Victorian turn of phrase, but appropriate to the 19th-century sideshow gasps drawn by the absolutely uncanny model







Voice acting is excellent throughout, from Diesel's laconic, rumbling narration to a deliciously camp, clipped turn from The A Team's Dwight Schultz as the prison warden. Other cult names on the roster include Xzibit, Ron Perlman and Diesel's Pitch Black co-star Cole Hauser

As the opening credits roll on *The Chronicles of Riddick*, the eponymous antihero is walked into Butcher Bay – the vast, squalid prison-city that is the game's sole setting – over ominous orchestral swells and under the slowly fading names of an impressive cast list. The guard barks and swears his way through the house rules while inmates watch the new arrival pass with wary eyes, murmuring and growling to themselves. It's a textbook piece of scene setting, borrowing all the atmospheric firepower the game's licence can afford, and using every trick in the big book of cinematic technique. Well, not every trick. Not at all, in fact, because the camera is absent and the player is already behind Riddick's eyes, taking in the scene with sweeps of the right thumbstick, controlling the character even when the character has no control.

In itself, this may be no more than a lift from that unforgettable introduction to *Half-Life*. But it's an inspired lift, a sure-footed piece of tightrope walking and a clear statement of intent: *Riddick* suffers no film envy, nor is it going to squander its IP on window dressing for generic videogame action. It's its own beast, and it intends to fuse its celluloid inspiration and its native medium so closely you can't see the join.

The freedom to plunge areas into complete darkness to gain an advantage over your foes hands the initiative back to the player

Fittingly, then, the lead character's trademark from the films – his ability to see in the dark, gifted to him early on in this game – also provides *Riddick* with its own signature twist on stealth action. The freedom to plunge areas into complete darkness to gain an advantage over your foes hands the initiative back to the player in a genre where you can all too often feel beaten by circumstance. It makes this easily one of the most rewarding and empowering stealth games to date, helped by a transparent, uncluttered interface and some well-sorted controls (the clumsy and counter-intuitive weapon-select aside). If it has been under-exploited – and sadly, it has – it's only down to an admirable pursuit of variety. Admirable, but slightly misguided, because many of the game's other innovations and idiosyncrasies are not so sure of their mark. The firstperson fisticuffs are as woolly, one-dimensional and frantic as the firefights or the sneaking are measured and precise.

The central importance of light and shade neatly integrates the game's vastly impressive graphics with the action at its heart. Those astonishingly realistic lighting effects are a huge asset in terms of information and atmosphere, as they carve the meticulously rendered, almost tactile grit and granite into inviting pools of shadow, exposed

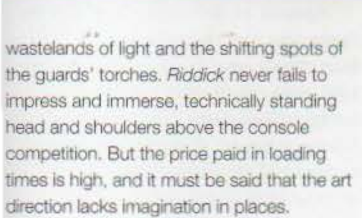
Previously in E135, E138







The guards are just smart enough to be credible, but still stupid enough to be fun. But it's a shame we're expected to believe that a man in a one-ton suit of riot armour isn't capable of following his prey through a door



wastelands of light and the shifting spots of the guards' torches. *Riddick* never fails to impress and immerse, technically standing head and shoulders above the console competition. But the price paid in loading times is high, and it must be said that the art direction lacks imagination in places.

Where *Riddick* is both bravest and weakest, perhaps, is in its touching determination to recreate prison life (or prison life as it appears on film). This leads to long tracts of talking, trading, pledging favours, to-ing and fro-ing between NPCs; gradually amassing information and social climbing, slammer-style. You can be shot dead by the guards for so much as raising your fists or having a weapon equipped at these times, and action comes only in the form of occasional, sanctioned bouts. It does wonders for the suspension of disbelief, and gives the expansive, lovingly scripted cast (heavy with clunk-clink cliché as they are) room to breathe. What it *isn't* is any fun. Ultimately, you feel you're just doing time at the whim of the designers, and the RPG-lite elements of inventory and task management sit ill in such a streamlined and focused title.

This is just the most serious example of *Riddick*'s most endemic flaw: poor pacing. The game's middle third makes up more than half of it (if you'll forgive our arithmetic), and is the most boring and frustrating by far, eking out challenges through restrictions on both weapons and the opportunity for Riddick to do what he does best – make places to hide and kill in. It's here that the environments seem most monotonous too, and the game's talent for dramatic set-pieces deserts it.

All is forgiven, however, as *Riddick*'s closing act is short, but oh so toothsomely sweet. In quick succession come a drastic shift in visual tone, a startling and inventive conundrum and a hilarious, bombastic climax that allows Riddick to take revenge on his captors (and the player to take revenge on the frustrations of stealth games) in high style. It's not just a sense of humour and flair for mayhem that *Riddick* shares with its star; it's a compact, muscular and singleminded piece of work, too. Flawed, yes, but so confident and independent that it's hard not to like.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten



Me and my shadow

Immersing players in the game world is seldom a problem from a firstperson perspective, but giving them a physical presence there, and an identification with a recognisable character, is much harder to achieve. Starbreeze has chosen to have Riddick cast a sharp, exquisitely animated and unmistakable shadow. Catching sight of the hero's coiled form creeping along the wall ahead of you, and towards his next victim, is a dark and vicarious thrill.



Spider-Man 2

Format: **GC, PS2, Xbox (version tested)** Publisher: **Activision** Developer: **Treyarch** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now**





Spider-Man can purchase extra moves with his hero points, and there's fun to be had from trying out all the combos and air-juggles





This is the game of the film and broadly mimics the story played out by Maguire, Dunst, Molina and co. However, though the movie may be an improvement over its predecessor, the game interpretation is undermined by too many dull moments.

Unlike the previous games in the series, this *Spider-Man* has been given the key to Manhattan. 'A massive free-roaming, do-anything, virtual city' promises the press release, failing to mention that it's as regimented as a Stalinist boot-camp. Building a working universe is one thing; making it appear to teem with life and possibility is quite another. It's not as intricate or appealing as, say, *Vice City* and there's little use in exploring every alleyway and rooftop because, apart from the rare secret token, there's nothing to discover.

At least Spider-Man's greatest asset, the ability to soar between buildings by web-slinging, has been captured with grace and felicity. This is by far the game's strongest feature and once you buy a few ability upgrades (from shops dotted around the city) you will be propelling yourself between skyscrapers with speed and majesty. The web attaches itself to the nearest building, causing Spider-Man to move forwards and sideways. Momentum can be maintained by letting go of the web, turning in another direction and firing again. Technique improves with practice, but the sensation of flying through the air and defying gravity has been executed brilliantly.

> Spider-Man's greatest asset, the ability to soar between buildings by web-slinging, has been captured with grace and felicity

The representation of New York is hardly breathtaking – visually and architecturally *Spider-Man 2* is robust rather than resplendent – but climbing and swinging from all the famous landmarks is an attraction in itself, and the draw distance is powerful enough to give you great views once you've scaled the top of the Empire State Building. The map works well, highlighting the mission-specific goals, hint markers and shops, and navigation around the city is stress free, bar the occasional time limit on a task.

However, it's the mission tasks that give *Spider-Man 2* an almighty slug in the face. Each chapter asks you to complete two or three goals, one of which is to collect a number of hero points. Disastrously, the bulk of these points are mustered by walking up to distressed citizens (highlighted by luminous icons above their heads) and pressing 'X'. After completing a mere handful of these missions you'll find that they begin to repeat. Save a man dangling from a roof, foil an armed robbery, escort an injured citizen to hospital – again, again, again. The result is that *Spider-Man 2* contains more padding than Tobey Maguire's costume. Is American developer Treyarch simply short of level designers? It's more likely that a tight deadline forced its ambition to be reigned in.

These missions are even presented

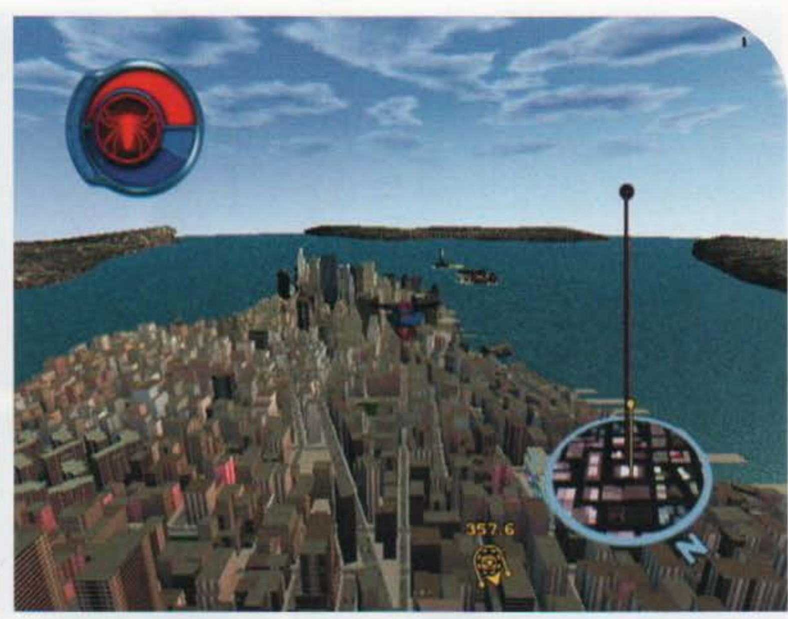




It's a technically accomplished, if not stunningly beautiful, representation of Manhattan, but the main fault with *Spider-Man 2* is its insistence on making you repeatedly face boring street crime

Previously in E128











Climb high enough and you will be treated to some magnificent views of Manhattan (top)

clumsily. The hustle and bustle of the city is interspersed with random comments from citizens as you swing by – "Get a real job," one of them shouts – but should you decide to take on a mission at that moment the audio clip is awkwardly interrupted. It's a small point, but indicative of the game's lack of final polish.

After so much secrecy on the part of the game's publisher it would be ill-mannered to reveal plot details. Suffice it to say the story-driven missions are only marginally better than the ones you take on at your discretion. Some are boss fights, some involve arena combat, others see you chasing another well-known superhero across the rooftops. The variety makes a welcome change and the combat is multi-layered – there are plenty of ability upgrades to collect that can increase the complexity with which you can batter, fling and twirl roughnecks around on a bit of web. Snatching weapons out of hoodlums' hands then air-juggling them with your fists can be great fun.

Spider-Man 2 presents players with a city ripe for action and exploration, but once you swing down out of the clouds and take a closer look at the grubby streets and roads strewn with vehicles, you'll find little to pique your interest. Swinging through the city is delightful and makes you feel superheroic – which is exactly what's expected – but the unimaginative missions soon take the shine off what could have been an excellent adventure. This a game that bravely keeps its pants on the outside but never ends up looking cool.

Edge rating: Six out of ten



Time flies

Along with Bruce Campbell, Kirsten Dunst and Alfred Molina, Tobey Maguire supplies his voice. Delivered with his trademark dopey drawl, it adds immeasurably to the atmosphere. Just like the comic book hero, Spidey is constantly turning up late for appointments, but while this works as a dramatic device in the movie it becomes irksome in the game, especially when you reach your goal within the allotted time.

Front Mission 4

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Square-Enix** Developer: **In-house** Price: **$50 (£28)** Release: **Out now (US, Japan) TBC (UK)**

Previously in E131



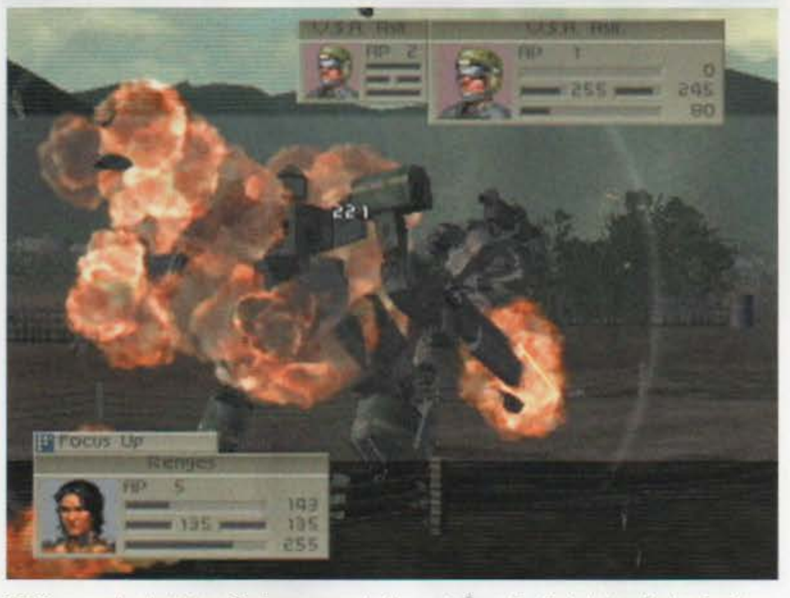






Some missions will see you fielding as many as ten units, but the ability to speed up or skip animation and quicksave mid-battle makes matters less dauntingly time-intensive





FM4 is generally adept at positioning cameras for the most dramatic effect during attack animations. Felling enemies with a withering barrage or lethally accurate sniper round never fails to satisfy

This is a test

Players can earn pilot experience and cash by replaying maps against a heavier enemy presence in the simulator. Some simulations are only unlocked by completing unlisted objectives in the main game – such as destroying fleeing enemy units or finishing maps under par – and these award secret weapons or parts. On top of the 29 story levels, the simulations provide nearly another game's worth of engagements.

Even with the five-year head start *Final Fantasy* has on *Front Mission*, the widening numerical gap between the two seminal series suggests sober near-future mech tactics are on the back foot to Technicolor fantasy melodrama. Rather than redress the balance, *FM4* takes itself even more stiflingly seriously, be it with the dry storyline, subdued visuals or rigid mechanics exhumed from carbonite.

Its world is largely cast in cold greys and hazy browns, and the military hardware that tracks through it is (intentionally) assembly-line functional rather than showily designed – but it's not without a spartan attractiveness. While the fully 3D battlefields make for a more solid, evocative experience, there's disappointingly little effect on gameplay: neither man-made nor natural features provide any interaction, even in the most one-sided sense of collapsing under fire or underfoot.

The biggest rewrite of the *Front Mission* rulebook is the new Link System, in which pilots can be assigned out-of-turn supporting fire actions when their partners are attacked. Engineering situations so an enemy provokes counter attacks from half your platoon – a wildly unfair display of mechanised bullying that few will limp away from unscathed – becomes *FM4*'s leading strategy, both on and off the field. Enemies can link up for equally devastating effect, but are easily lured out of formation, making it less of a tactical consideration than it might have been.

In truth, most of the tactical elements of *FM4* are less than they might have been, although this is as much from the stubbornly introverted design of the series rather than a new failing on the game's part. Your most potent weapon remains the invisible dice roll determining which, if any, of your pilot's skills will activate in combat (using lengthy linked attacks can increase the chances), and real strategic thinking is less useful than exploiting the singlemindedness of the enemy AI. That rings true of many SRPGs, but can leave a cheap aftertaste to an otherwise decisive victory – though that guilt is easily rationalised away when facing later foes exponentially more powerful and numerous than you.

For those unconcerned with being the only presence on the battlefield capable of lateral thinking, there's a lot of density here, if not depth. If the series is to continue, though, it's clear that the old school has a lot to learn.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

Ape Escape: Gacha Mecha Athlete

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **SCEI** Developer: **In-house** Price: **¥6,800 (£34)** Release: **Out now (Japan) TBC (UK)**

Previously in **E**136

A*pe Escape: Gacha Mecha Athlete* isn't a true sequel in the *Piposaru* bloodline, more a single-idea spin-off like *Ape Escape 2001*. Perhaps that's evident from the screenshots, the visuals now brightly cel shaded, storyboard levels replaced with open-ended arenas. Or perhaps from the name: *Athlete* implies *Track & Field*, and this is a controller-testing multiplayer challenge set across a series of *PowerStone*-style minigames. It's 'rush around and hit each other', essentially, with enlivening diversions like coins, power-ups and vehicles.

The first *Ape Escape*'s function was to sell the analogue stick to players born with digital thumbs, and so it makes sense that this, the fourth in the series, has a tactile, user-friendly weapon control system. Movement is controlled with the left analogue stick, strokes of the weapon with the right. So, with the melee weapon selected, pushing it in a direction will perform an equivalently oriented strike, while twisting it in a circle will lead to a sweep. Catapults perform similarly intuitively; pull in the opposite direction to your enemy, pause for power, and release.

But as much as the system benefits the game, it also curses it. Shorn of analogue-stick camera control, the thirdperson sections of *Gacha Mecha Athlete* are unwieldy and frustrating. R1 allows for some brutal positioning, but it's no substitute for allowing the user to see what they want to see. Worse than that, perhaps, the sensory feedback that comes with using the weapons juxtaposes unfortunately against the control system's basics. Running is floaty, the double jump feels erratic, and, in a thirdperson action platform game where landing and locking to a solid surface is as important as being ready to clobber someone with a stick when you do, unexpectedly falling into oblivion is the sort of thing that inspires thrown controllers.

Still, that's funny in itself, isn't it? It's easy to excuse *Ape Escape: Gacha Mecha Athlete* an awful lot in the name of the party game, that hazy (lazy?) genre where the object isn't to beat the computer, but your friends. In a sense you're all on the same playing field, and flaws in design and mechanic can be excused. But that's a mirage; just as *Double Dash*'s random nature levels newcomers and experts but means the game will never be as satisfying in the long term, so *Gacha Mecha Athlete*'s flaws are initially forgivably amusing, but ultimately wearing.

Edge rating: Five out of ten









The sub-aqua stages are in thirdperson. They're tricky to control, but far less so than the painful paddleboat sequences, which will be familiar to those who've unlocked the river rafting section of *Super Monkey Ball 2*



The coin chases have the screen steadily scroll to the right while players compete to collect the most tokens. In essence, the game isn't won or lost until the last 20 yards, when players clatter against each other in attempts to steal victory

Monkey see, monkey do

Gacha Mecha Athlete's (Japanese-heavy) frontend hides a fabulous selection of unlockables that, for those who can read monkey-scripted kana, may provide reason enough to play through the game's story mode. Success in events brings reward in the form of comedy ID cards and letters from the cute little simians, and sometimes gifts, too: each character has a variety of outfits to help them look their best in the tiny tournaments.

Richard Burns Rally

Format: **PC, PS2 (version tested), Xbox** Publisher: **SCi** Developer: **Warthog** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now (PS2, Xbox) September 3 (PC)** Previously in **E**131









Just six countries feature, albeit with a healthy number of stages each, while licensing issues dictate that the car selection is a mix of recent WRC contenders





Much effort has clearly gone into recreating the topography of the road surface, with great success – you really get to feel every bump, trough and camber change, as well as every impact in a crash

Feel the Burns

While input from Richard Burns will have inevitably been affected by the 2001 WRC champion's health concerns, Warthog has nevertheless included Burns-specific modes. In Richard Burns Challenge you get to compete head to head against the times set by the man himself. In another neat touch, you get to be Burns' passenger in Rally School, which sets the benchmark for the standard of driving you should aim for.

You won't often find us having to use a force-feedback wheel in order to conquer a driving game. But rarer still is one we can't overcome. Yet, as this issue goes to press, we have yet to win a single stage in *Richard Burns Rally* (other than on 'easy', which obviously doesn't count). To state that Warthog's rally effort is difficult is a severe understatement. You can forget about throwing cars into corners with reckless abandon and powering out of the other end, bodywork unscathed (as is typical in many rally titles) – more often than not you'll be asking for spectator assistance in getting your car back on its wheels (and on the track).

RBR is hard because it's realistic. The level of simulation is on a par with past high-end examples on PC, and unlike anything ever to have reached a console. One look at the options – which let you play around with aspects such as tyre and brake pressures and, yes, even the strut platform height of the geometry – should leave you with little doubt of the game's intentions. Should you still need convincing, visit the Rally School, where you'll be taught real-world rally techniques such as left-foot braking and Scandinavian flicks. Once you enter a rally you'll have no choice but to put into practice what you've learned. Push too hard – easily done – and you'll get a chance to experience the dynamic scenery elements, as well as how quickly you can damage a world rally car beyond repair (depending on the damage setting, of course).

Faults are mainly in presentation. There is an issue with excessive loading (mostly in the essentially obligatory Rally School) but it's an overall lack of personality that ultimately grates. While Burns and co-driver Robert Reid feature at various points in the game, the opportunity to deliver an encompassing rally experience and capitalise on the association with a leading driver hasn't quite been fulfilled (in the way that Codemasters' *CMR3* similarly failed). There's a certain sterility to pre- and post-stage proceedings – not helped by Paul Oakenfold's audio contribution – and you often don't feel as engaged as you should.

That aside, it's a pleasure to be challenged this hard. *RBR* demands a level of concentration and a delicacy of control that the majority of gamers won't have encountered before, thus ensuring it occupies a genuine gap in a crowded market. A harsh but rewarding drive.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten

City Of Heroes

Format: **PC** Publisher: **NCSoft** Developer: **Cryptic Studios** Price: **$50 (£27) then $15 (£8) per month** Release: **Out now**

Previously in **E**121

Surface appears to be the new depth, at least as far as the current generation of massively multiplayer games are concerned. The living, functioning economies of *Ultima Online* have turned increasingly vestigial, at least in the mainstream. *Eve Online* is pretty much the sole proponent of the approach, with new games concentrating on the simple joys of hitting things to get stronger to be able to hit stronger things. *City Of Heroes* is one of the most thorough attempts at this, playing as a superhero *Diablo* with no economy modelling. It's all the better for it.

COH, more than any game of its type, caters to the sort of player who'll play for a month or so, then perhaps resubscribe six months later for another crack. It understands that, with the number of MMRPGs available and the time demands of the genre, it's pretty much impossible to play more than one at once, so there's a populace that floats from game to game as they're released. So *COH* caters for cheap, illicit thrills, trying to charm the gamer as quickly as possible. It's one of the few games of its type you can actually play for an hour, take on one of its missions, and have a meaningful unit of experience. Straight in. Straight out. Gamer satisfied.

Even the smallest part attempts to seduce. Random fights with monsters are a genre staple, but while in other games these creatures would be standing around, *COH* fashions them into a mini-narrative. They'll be mugging someone, stealing hubcaps or sacrificing a victim on an altar. As players intervene, curses about interfering spandex will be uttered. Combat ensues. Grateful citizens rush up with compliments before our heroes bound away across the city. Surface detail that doesn't influence the core experience? Sure. Atmospheric and experience enhancing? Absolutely.

COH understands the attraction of its subject, walking the line between celebration and parody. While higher levels bring advanced options, not least tall-building leaping, the choices before the starting player are both intoxicating and gloriously superficial. Making a character is easy, but choosing from the vast array of costumes... that's a real challenge. Within minutes you'll be playing a unique hero, having a focused entertainment experience. Only the dogmatic will see this as a selling out of the virtual world hype of MMRPGs. By throwing away the conceptual baggage, this one flies.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten









The largest omission is player-versus-player fighting. Such minded people should wait for the announced *City Of Villains* expansion



Cops roam the streets, but – like everyone else – spend most of their time running away from any trouble. And you can't really blame them



Origin story

While most games let your alter your avatar's appearance, everything pales compared to the array of sartological options *City Of Heroes* presents you with. This leads to a world where your fellow travellers are all as individual as – well – individuals, as a simple glance around any of the plazas will reveal. It also leads to a climate where players deliberately attempt to express themselves through their appearance, with clever designs often gaining compliments from admirers.

Tetsujin 28go

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Bandai** Developer: **Sandlot** Price: **Y6,800 (£34)** Release: **Out now (Japan), TBC (UK)** Previously in **E**139





Multiplayer modes also feature, but are overcomplicated either by camera woes (in splitscreen coop) or the amount of effort required to coordinate actually squaring off against each other in the two-to-fourplayer deathmatch mode





Tetsujin 28go's greatest strength is that, regardless of your familiarity with its namesake series, it's an instantly nostalgic parade of Saturday morning cartoon moments. Our remote-controlled Iron Man hefts buildings like cardboard boxes, pounds monstrous robot foes through city blocks, cups his schoolboy controller Shotaro in massive hands and rockets across the sky – but the nuances that work so well to frame this imagery also tend to hamstring the game.

The spectacle-seeking camera follows thrown punches and objects to great effect on a successful hit, but a miss leaves Tetsujin off-screen for seconds at a time. Even when the camera does workably focus on him, it's often facing away from enemies, making retaliation a matter of guesswork.

Frantically repositioning Shotaro in search of a useful view of the battle leaves Tetsujin defenceless – only one can be controlled at a time – and elation can rapidly turn to exasperation. But it's too lovingly rendered, and too delightful when it all works, to dismiss entirely: curiously for a giant robot game, it's all heart.

Edge rating: Five out of ten

Chaos League

Format: **PC** Publisher: **Digital Jesters** Developer: **Cyanide** Price: **£30** Release: **August 6** Previously in **E**137

Players of Games Workshop's Blood Bowl will already be familiar with *Chaos League*'s conceit. While not connected, the former is a clear influence: a complicated combination of a fantasy RPG with the loosest elements of American football, approached with a strategy mindset.

The ultimate aim is to carry the pigskin (literally) across the opposition's line as many times as possible. The reality is maiming, exploding or mutilating the foe using weapons and spells. This is performed entertainingly with an enormous number of traditional fantasy characters – orcs, fairies, elves, humans and so on – each with a variety of combatants and approaches to the game. The detail is impressive, and the implementation of skills, although complex, is well initiated.

However, a ridiculous bug renders the tutorial a farce, and alongside moments of the game left in French, an overall shoddy feeling to the production spoils a great deal more. Where there should be panache, there are rough edges. As a comedy, it achieves much. It *is* funny. But as a sports game a great deal more polish is required.



Edge rating: Six out of ten









In all its garish glory, giant trees fight valiantly alongside elves against the undead hordes while the commentators discuss which cheerleaders they fancy



The making of...

Syndicate

A world run by heavily armed cyborgs working for multinational corporations may be a dream in boardrooms the world over, but only one game gave MDs the chance to live out the fantasy

"I used to get friends, around five of them, to come in at the weekends. Instead of going to the pub..."

Sean Cooper's train of thought momentarily stalls, and he pauses. It's over ten years since he led the *Syndicate* project; more than a decade since Bullfrog's dystopian opus beguiled gamers and critics with its combination of progressive, squad-based shoot 'em up, strategic planning and – for the time – refreshingly freeform environs. "What I wanted to do with my life at that point was work – I didn't want to go to the pub or chat up girls," Cooper continues, with disarming candour. "We'd come in and play it multiplayer. We'd all go round trying to kill each other, and I'd hear someone say: 'Ah... that's shit', and then I'd try to fix the problem. It was just a great atmosphere in which to create a game. We had no one telling us what to do. We did what we wanted to."

The most adroit explanation of Bullfrog's success in the early '90s is that its staff genuinely enjoyed themselves, making games that, first



Original format: **PC**
Publisher: **Electronic Arts**
Developer: **Bullfrog**
Origin: **UK**
Original release date: **1993**



According to Trowers, each territory was once planned to feature three individual missions: the standard first run as your syndicate expands, a second in the event of a revolt, and a third should your syndicate ever lose control

and foremost, *they* wanted to play. You can discuss Peter Molyneux's qualities as a game designer, **Glenn Corpes**' coding prowess, Les Edgar's business nous, or highlight the quality of the post-*Populous* appointments to a growing company – individuals like **Alex Trowers** (now of Kuju), Cooper (now at EA's Warrington studio) and **Paul McLaughlin** (now with Molyneux at Lionhead), among others. But if you really want to understand why *Syndicate* worked so well, had so many innovative features, and is invariably namechecked in Best Games Ever! lists, know this: Bullfrog was very much its own best customer.

Level three lunch

Syndicate, once called *Cyber Assault*, first took shape during a liquid lunch. "It really just evolved," reveals Corpes, the former Bullfrog uber-coder who is now plying his trade at Climax. "I have very vague memories of a lunchtime design meeting in the pub, talk of multiple characters. I think it was an overhang from an older game. *Flood* – a 2D platformer for the ST and Amiga – originally had four players with their own cameras, and you could switch any camera to the main screen. It didn't work at all, and *Flood* evolved into a completely different game, a cutesy platformer. But a few people were kind of attached to the four character thing…"

Actually, Cooper tells us, *Syndicate* once had eight on-screen charges for players to control. With all but himself and Trowers apparently finding this large number of heavily armed cyborg agents unwieldy, the decision to reduce the number of agents was to prove pivotal. "The eight players versus the four… that was a big transition," Cooper admits. "It didn't feel that good with eight, but we reduced it to four and, all of a sudden, it really worked. And you could set them up differently – you didn't really have time to do that with eight."

Rise of a new force

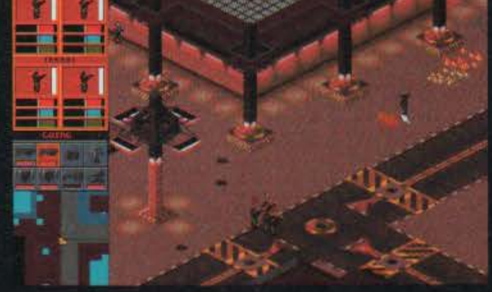
Syndicate was Bullfrog's first game to lead on PC, an announcement that led to cries of anguish from Amiga users (later mollified by Mike Diskette's excellent port). "I think the decision to switch was based purely on the fact that the PC allowed us to do all of the cool city stuff that we wanted to," explains Trowers. "The Amiga, bless its cottons, just wasn't powerful enough. Early versions of the fully isometric 3D, full-screen engine never used to get above 12fps with any more than a handful of guys running around. Even on the PCs in those days, we had to do some pretty nifty graphics stuff to get the whole thing to work at a reasonable speed. I think all of it made us think that the Amiga had pretty much run its course and that the PC would take over as the main platform. And we were intrigued by all this wonderful network stuff. The Bullfrog philosophy on making games was to try the whole thing out multiplayer and then make an AI to emulate the human players.

"Suddenly we weren't restricted to just two players. I think we all got very excited about this potential."

Just as *Populous* evolved through multiplayer matches between Molyneux and Corpes, networked games of *Syndicate* were a staple component of lunchtimes and late nights at the Bullfrog office. "We were playing it before a line of AI code had been written," says Corpes. "The gameplay evolved by playing it multiplayer over the network. This is the best way of designing games and should be done more often, rather than hacking multiplayer in as an afterthought."

"We'd get a few of our mates over after work and just play the thing multiplayer," recalls Trowers. "By doing that, we worked out what was fun and how the AI should operate and just built on that. It was a very iterative process and the most fun I've had in this industry – we'd play the game, make changes, whack out a new version and try the extra stuff." Inspired by these network sessions, Trowers began to build *Syndicate*'s singleplayer missions. "Once the maps were all built, it was a simple case of populating them and messing around with the layout of bad guys until it felt 'right'," he explains. "There was no overall plot or story that had to drive the levels – each was a disparate, modular experience. I was completely free to design each mission as I felt at that time. Rather

"We'd get a few of our mates over after work and just play the thing multiplayer. It was a very iterative process and the most fun I've had in this industry"

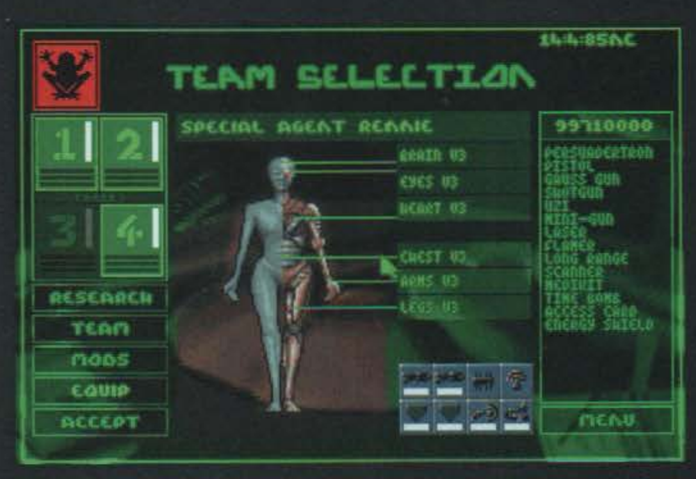




The cars in *Syndicate*, 'locked' to roads as if on rails, seemed something of a missed opportunity – but this was a design decision, not a shortcoming of Bullfrog's engine or coding



Cooper laments not having the opportunity to include more destruction and mayhem in *Syndicate*. Imagine…



Taking a leaf from the Nintendo design bible, *Syndicate* always promised another upgrade or toy. Customising and equipping agents was a clever feature and one that, by and large, worked

than the majority of missions in today's games, where there is a linear, set path to completion, a *Syndicate* mission was more of an environment where the player was free to attempt it in any way he liked. Once you have the basic rules of the world established, these are very easy to create… but they can be an absolute nightmare to balance."

Life of the city

With an ambitious and evolving brief – particularly its 'living' cities, populated by enemy agents, police, pedestrians and vehicles – Cooper toiled night and day to create a solid engine. "It was riddled with complexities – getting the city to display, moving people behind other stuff," he recalls. "It was kind of driven by one function called 'coversprite', I remember. Basically, the guys were drawn, then you drew over the top again to cover them. Sorting that out went on for about a year."

"I sort of inspired the isometric engine," says Corpes. "I'd been working on an optimised scrolling isometric engine some time before it started that worked by only updating the parts of the screen that had changed – as opposed to *Populous* that just redrew the whole scene – but it went nowhere. Sean basically rewrote this a year or so later when we moved to the PC."

"Glenn was the expert programmer, and I was… well, I'm *still* rubbish at it," laughs Cooper. "For me, it was just about keeping things simple. But he knew a lot about technical stuff. I'd call him up at, like, four in the morning, and I'd say: 'Glenn, I've got a problem. You've *got* to come in sort it out, because I've got to put it on to these disks and send it off'. And he'd be like" – Cooper makes an exasperated, theatrical sigh – "'Oh… *bloody hell!* Right, I'm coming in'. And he'd come in and just sort it out."

Corpes, originally hired as an artist, is arguably the great unsung hero of Bullfrog's meteoric rise to the videogame development A-list. "Glenn was instrumental in that way," enthuses Cooper. "He could see the engine; he could see the technology. He couldn't necessarily see the game, but he could see the technology – raising or lowering the land in *Populous*, ways in which we could have really tall buildings in *Syndicate* and have people going behind stuff. And then there was *Magic Carpet*. If you take him out of the equation, I don't think Bullfrog would have been anything, if you see what I mean. He was an inspiration. He'd come up with a technical idea, and we'd be, like: 'Fuck me, that would be *awesome!* We could do this, and this, and this…'"

Drawing obvious inspiration from a certain Ridley Scott opus, *Syndicate*'s hi-res cityscapes were highly striking. "Paul McLaughlin and Chris Hill drove the visualisation side, and I was a right pain for them to work with," admits Cooper. "We had to build these sprites, and they were all cut into little pieces: heads, bodies, legs."

"Sean was always a pain in the arse," says McLaughlin. "He's mellowed a bit in recent years, I gather, but in the old days he wasn't much of a 'people person'. If he wanted something he'd 'tell' you rather than ask, and if he thought it was shit – which he always did – he'd tell you that, too. He got quite frustrated with his requirements being lost in the programmer-artist translator. Often he'd end up red in the face with Chris and myself just staring at him with smiles on our faces. It was cool, though: we were all learning together, really, and everyone on the team did have a sense of humour."

"The sprites were a nightmare, though," McLaughlin explains. "They had separate heads, torsos and legs so we could assemble a variety of characters. Creating something that looked like a person on that scale, let alone the cool superdetailed images





Although the flamethrower effect itself – a chain of simple sprites – was far from impressive, the screams of victims were memorably loud and unpleasant, making it a favourite of more pitiless players



All four agents have their chemical enhancements set to maximum. Increasing their aggression levels caused them to fire on their own initiative, which was initially jarring, but when you got to grips with the squad system it suddenly made sense



The first time you attacked one of *Syndicate*'s trains, you expected it to emerge unscathed and move on: solid, immutable, as all videogame furniture tended to be at the time. Watching it explode was one of the greatest pleasures of the 16bit era

in our heads, was such a struggle. We made a deliberate decision to sacrifice colours for dots. This was one of the first 'engines' that used such high resolution and we were really excited. Not seeing pixels and noticing aliasing was such a revelation – we felt the future of computer graphics was upon us."

"It ran in 640x480 while everyone else was writing in 320x200," Corpes contributes. "Everyone thought it was SVGA because of the resolution, but it actually ran in a very well chosen 16 colours and worked on any old VGA card thanks to the way it only updated parts of the screen at a time. It was all really sneaky stuff."

"Looking at the game today, what you see on screen has very little to do with what was in my head," continues McLaughlin. "Chris Hill and I had visions of dystopian futuristic cityscapes like in Blade Runner, with lots of trash, hover cars and atmosphere. Of course, very little of this came across in the end, and I'm now convinced that future civilisations won't be tile and sprite-based."

Syndicate's unusually dark feel was not restricted to its countenance. Long before *Grand Theft Auto*, the populations of *Syndicate*'s isometric stages were populated with bit-part, bitmap victims. Self-appointed moral arbiters may blanche at the suggestion, but engaging in wanton, pixel-based slaughter was one of the game's principle pleasures, and was always designed to be just that. "I wanted to flame them, I wanted to shoot them, I wanted to blow them up," says Cooper of *Syndicate*'s sprites. "I think we didn't quite implement it as well as we could have. I'd liked to have seen bodies flying through the air; I wanted to minigun people and have them pinned to a wall. All those things we so badly wanted to do, but we'd have been adding another year to the project time, or so it felt at the time. Memory constraints were the big problem."

A mighty arsenal

From the explosive gauss gun – originally an EMP weapon, according to Trowers – to what must be the most satisfying implementation of a minigun in videogame history, *Syndicate* was packed with a wishlist of excellent armaments, upgrades and gadgets. "Once we'd developed the gameplay and we'd got the squad-based shooter element, people started coming up with ideas for weapons," recalls Cooper. "The persuadatron came out of nowhere, really – I don't know to this day whose idea it was. I think Peter's still convinced that it's his. It created something interesting: being able to build an army, and was actually quite simple to do. It could be done a lot better… Ah, if we were to do it again now…"

With a management component that drip-fed new gadgetry as players progressed through its many levels, *Syndicate*'s frontend was a perfect complement to its tense, often frantic in-game combat. Strangely, Trowers remembers it with a certain regret. "In hindsight, it was a bit of a pain to implement as it made it quite easy to break the game," he admits. "You could just sit there and wait for the next thing to be ready. The balancing of the mid-levels also became a bit of a nightmare as you couldn't guarantee what the player had access to at the start of the mission. I guess what I'm trying to say is that it was a cool feature, but I'd do it differently nowadays."

Obviously, certain features had to be dropped; working with 80386-based PCs and needing to maximise compatibility, sacrifices were made. Cooper has one piece of trivia that may surprise one-time *Syndicate* devotees: its vehicles were only 'locked' to roads at a late stage in its development. "We had, at one point, allowed players to get into a car and drive anywhere," he reveals. "The reason I took it out is because it didn't look very good – we didn't have enough memory to store the eight different directions for each vehicle and had to reduce them to four. And when playing multiplayer, what was to stop players from simply running over the other agents? We couldn't come up with anything that solved that. It was quite late on in the alpha when I took it out."

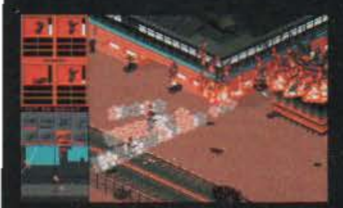
"I had visions of dystopian futuristic cityscapes like in Blade Runner, with lots of trash, hover cars and atmosphere. Of course, very little of this came across"

However, the biggest disappointment for the *Syndicate* team was the enforced removal of its multiplayer mode during the QA process. "EA couldn't get the network game working on their system, so we had to drop it," laments Trowers. "This was a major blow in my opinion as the multiplayer game was so strong and not many people got to experience it that way. It was how we used to play it, and it was the way it was designed to be played. Snipers behind buildings, carjackings and





The gauss gun, along with the minigun, is undoubtedly one of the most visually and aurally arresting weapons in shooter history




Long before the *Grand Theft Auto* series, *Syndicate* allowed players the luxury of cutting loose and enjoying the cathartic pleasure of a noisy, amoral city rampage with automatic weapons

drive-by shootings take on a whole new dimension when it's your mate you've just ambushed."

Although later reinstated for the *American Revolt* mission pack, the loss of out-of-the-box network play was a huge shame. Might Bullfrog be regarded, with id, as a pioneer of network gaming were it to have been fixed in time? Who can say? Listening to Trowers, though, it's clear that the published version of *Syndicate* lost a killer feature. "People who would normally leave at six on the dot would hang around for hours to play the game," he explains. "If you weren't on your toes at lunchtime, the game would fill up and you'd be left out. I'm not sure how much of this is rosetinted specs, but I'm pretty sure, even at the time, we knew we had a classic on our hands."

The leader

"It was Sean's first crack at leading a team, and he really did everything he could to make it work," says McLaughlin. "In all honesty I think it's one of the most fun titles I've worked on. It's certainly the one I remember playing at lunchtimes, after work and at home even when I didn't have to."

Syndicate shipped to the sound of critical approbation and a healthy rustling of cash changing hands. Closing our interview, we ask: how does Cooper feel about it now? Does he have any particular regrets?

"Looking back now, it's a bit of a masterpiece in some ways," he replies. "It was one of the highlights of my life working with Glenn, with Alex and with Peter. Looking back on the working relationships we had, on the team, that was the big thing. My biggest regret is that we didn't put enough destruction into it. I would have really liked to have, you know, fired a rocket launcher at a building and have a hole appear in it. But you just couldn't do it at the time. I wanted to see people flung into the air, people landing on buildings, people landing on cars that screech to a halt, all that kind of behaviour, that kind of world. But we just didn't know how to do it.

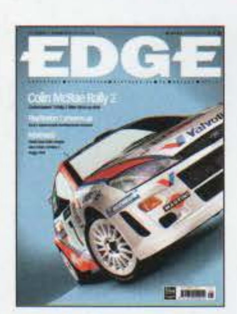
"It was my second game, and I'd only just started to get to grips with C at that point. We were there until four in the morning most days, getting in at 11 in the mornings. We were so inexperienced, all of us: a bunch of guys going into so-called work, and it was a *hobby!* Someone was paying us good money to go in and do it!"




Despite obvious confines, *Syndicate* was remarkably freeform: it provided the tools, and let you approach any given mission in the manner that you deemed appropriate. Even subtlety worked

RESET

Examining gaming history from **Edge**'s perspective, five years ago this month



Issue 75, September 1999

Ah, Edge. We're so consistently misunderstood. 'There is a danger', ran the editorial intro to **E**75, 'that discerning gameheads missed last month's issue because some less-than-switched-on newsagent employees took one look at the gorgeous F355 render that adorned its cover and promptly stacked it among the motoring titles on their shelves'.

Never one to miss a potentially ABC-damaging trick, this issue's cover did it again with a perfectly rendered vehicle promoting *Colin McRae 2*, car star of a six-page preview.

In fact, **E**75 was a bit of a six-page special. 'The Code Shop' looked at the Develop '99 conference, and we lamented that our trip to hang with weirdos, crusties and social outcasts wasn't Glastonbury-related. 'Hooray For Hollywood', meanwhile, took six pages to explain that games are a bit like cinema, except they're not.

Subjects with fewer than six pages included Red Storm, developer of the *Rainbow Six* games, and Cambridge-based Cyberlife Technology, whose *Creatures* were getting evermore complex.

And finally, once again warranting six pages, Channel 4's videogame show Bits was declared 'something of a victory for videogames on television'. While our pro-girls-who-game stance might have made a good opening to the piece, the sentiment was somewhat shattered by the magazine asking the girls if they'd get their kit off for a photoshoot. "Absolutely not," replied Aleks Krotoski. Still, better on the top shelf than in with the car mags, eh?

DID EDGE REALLY SAY THAT?
'Discovered: fattest Pac-Man ever'
Our report on Billy Mitchell's 'perfect game'. But is the magazine talking about the sprite, or the hairy hot sauce manufacturer?

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?
"It really fucks me off, actually."
Emily Newton Dunn on what it's like to be a woman in an industry where the most visible female is Lara Croft.

TESTSCREENS AND RATINGS:
Dino Crisis (PS; 8/10), *G-Police 2* (PS; 5/10), *Kingpin* (PC; 8/10), *Total Annihilation: Kingdoms* (PC; 7/10), *Driver* (PS; 7/10), *Metal Gear Solid: Integral* (PS; 6/10), *Buggy Heat* (DC; 6/10), *Shutukou Battle* (DC; 3/10), *Quake II* (N64; 7/10)



1



2

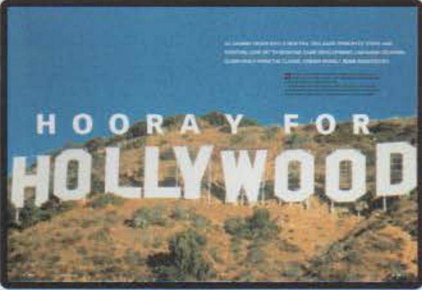




3



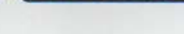
4



5



6



7



8



9



10

1. Europe's well-pitched Dreamcast adverts: "OMG! One kazillion players! Quick, buy!" 2. A better advert for DC (although this is the N64 version): Treasure's *Bangaioh* 3. 'Ornamental headgear is just one element that is about to be refined', we claim of PlayStation2 4. Claudia Trimde, one of Bits' original line-up 5. Hooray for Hollywood! 6. Prince Naseem, before everyone forgot who he was 7. A mini-focus on Sega's *Virtua Striker 2 V2000* 8. The people of Sweden name a street after Mario 9. Mucky Foot's *Urban Chaos* 10. Ken Livingstone plays at solving London's planning problems

inbox

Communicate by post:
Letters, **Edge**, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW
Or email (stating 'Inbox' in the message header):
edge@futurenet.co.uk

I have way too much time on my hands. As a consequence I decided to enter every score given in **Edge** (from issue one to issue 136 – yes, I have been buying the magazine since issue one) into a spreadsheet and create averages for each console featured and also for the console manufacturers. If a game was released across multiple platforms and **Edge** reviewed only one version, then I added the same review score to all platforms that game was released on. The final figures are very interesting indeed. I am a heavily biased Nintendo fan and I expected Nintendo to trounce all other manufacturers, but that simply was not the case. Sega, of all console manufacturers, had the highest average score. You will also notice that the newer consoles received a lower average than older consoles. What I noticed is that with newer consoles there were many more 7s, 8s and 9s awarded, but also more 2s and 3s. It would seem now that games have become either pretty good to excellent or just plain crap. There seem to be fewer middle-of-the-road games being released. I also noticed that games released across three or more platforms were on average awful, with very few receiving marks higher than 6. Games that received 8 or higher were generally platform specific.

These figures should settle arguments over which console is best (mathematically it is Nintendo 64 – woohoo!), but the reality is that the figures show how remarkably close the various consoles are in terms of game quality, and that the best console is the one with the games that lastonappeal most to you – whichever platform that may happen to be. So, happy gaming. The results are as follows:

Console	Average score
Nintendo 64	6.91
Saturn	6.80
PlayStation	6.62
Dreamcast	6.41
Game Boy Advance	6.32
GameCube	6.13
PlayStation2	6.12
Xbox	5.94

Console manufacturer	Average score
Sega	6.62
Nintendo	6.50
Sony	6.37
Microsoft	5.94

Average score for PC games: 6.95
Total score for all platforms: 11,340
Total number of reviews: 1,737
Average score across all platforms: 6.53

I have attached an Excel spreadsheet which presents more detailed results.
Paul Phillips

The **Edge** game cupboard could do with a good sorting out, Paul. You could even alphabetise it. Get in touch the next time you have a free week or so.

E139 provided numerous points of crystallisation of certain things I've recently become aware of in my own gaming taste: namely, that simple games are often the most fun, and that 'cinematic' storylines and interminable cut-scenes are, all too often, sapping the essence of gaming.

Those stories rarely hold much intrinsic value in any case. As RedEye notes, '*Ico*'s fairytale literacy is only intelligent, acute, so cute, when juxtaposed with *Jak & Daxter*. Put it next to The Neverending Story and it's already kid's stuff'. Let's face it, Umbrella was incorporated for no reason other than to plonk zombies in front of the player, to then be shot. And *Metal Gear Solid*'s premise of foiling the use of a mobile nuclear missile platform is certainly dramatic, but all that's really asked of the player is to avoid being spotted, and then to observe the rest passively.

Driver 3 is the antithesis of progression in videogames. Sacrificing a playable – or even serviceable – game engine in favour of the trappings and trinkets of the *GTA* genre is cynical in the extreme, and displays a total lack of love or respect for all that's good and fun about gaming. Conversely, in the same reviews section, lower budget fare *Mashed* is fêted for its 'elementary dynamic', and in Prescreen, *Trackmania Sunrise*'s arrival is celebrated as 'a new set of toys'.

But above all, it's *Espgaluda* that has won both my respect and my hard-earned cash this month. Why? Because it's thrilling where most games are tedious, pure where others are complicated and displays clarity of purpose where others fumble with their lip-syncing and mo-cap. It's telling that, on Cave's own Japanese bulletin boards, when the question of the game's ease (relative to other shmups) is raised, Cave's response is that they considered very carefully just how they could make the shooter genre as inclusive and as fun as possible. The complexity is there, within the delicate structure of the apparently simple mechanic. Those who go looking for it will be amply rewarded; those who simply seek a thrill shall not be disappointed.

So how come we find ourselves in such a sad state of affairs, where so few shmups ever see a western release, and even within Japan there are precious few developers still pursuing the genre? For this, I have no answer.
Samuel Baker

Perhaps the arrival of *Gradius V* in the UK might turn things around a little. On the other hand, it could simply be dismissed as a retro-flavoured curio, fail to even touch the PS2 top 20 and represent just another nail in the 2D shooter coffin.

You have to admire the Japanese and their subtle use of anecdote to imply criticism, as demonstrated by Toshihiro Nagoshi (AV Out, **E**139). With my cruder English vernacular I can whittle down his column to a sharper point: marketing is the biggest threat facing the games industry today.

Few can deny the importance of the marketing process, but Nagoshi should be lauded for making a stand against the sales team intent upon the wilful misrepresentation of his latest project. I fear the situation he relates is indicative of a wider crisis that currently grips the industry.

How come we find ourselves in such a sad state of affairs, where so few shmups ever see a western release, and even within Japan there are few developers pursuing the genre?



Samuel Baker cites *Espgaluda* as being deserving of his time and money in place of *Driver 3*, but does the market exist for 2D shooters nowadays?

Like it or not, marketing executives are the powerbrokers of today's games publishers. Often under pressure from fellow board members wanting to see a fast, cheap return on their money, their sales teams rely upon statistics to tell them which genres will bring the biggest retail. Thus the overriding concern becomes to blindly shoehorn the product – any product – into a box they can sell, irrespective of whether this reflects the virtues of the game or meets the needs of the consumer.

So, then, marketers make no creative investment in the games they sell and sometimes even have little experience of playing them. Yet it is these salesmen, not game makers, who are increasingly responsible for deciding what you and I find on the shelf. The result is diluted creativity and neglected quality control – whether the game is any good or not is a secondary concern to whether it can be sold.

Few creative leaders have the power to resist as Nagoshi has attempted. The rise of marketing-led decision-making and the consequential starvation of investment for risky new projects must immediately be re-examined. We as consumers can play a part by showing more discrimination with our purchasing decisions, but the impetus for change must come from strong leadership within the industry itself. I, however, will remain pessimistic while publishers can continue to reap profits offering such cynical and prosaic 'product'.
Chris Ward

We can take heart that even one of the biggest summer blockbusters, *Spider-Man 2*, offers up something more than a game of its ilk might have once upon a time. But then there are also other major sales successes that suffer from what you term neglected quality control. On which note...

Earlier this year my wife paid almost £300 for a set of four antique Chinese ivory-and-marble coasters. One of them was chipped in transit and two others were broken soon afterwards: they're very fragile and totally unsuitable for their intended purpose. Imagine my delight then upon purchasing *Driver 3*. I got a useful DVD case, a cheery manual and a robust and attractive double-sided coaster for just £45 – a significantly lower unit cost. I fully intend to purchase three more copies of the game as soon as possible, not only to benefit from such excellent value for money but also to help strike a blow against the ivory trade. Long may Atari prosper!
Paul Roundell

Something bothered me about the cover of **E**138. No, not the sleek-looking PSP and the threat of even more dominance by Sony over one of my longest-running pastimes. Rather, it was the text below the image that alarmed me the most: 'The best from E3... *The Legend Of Zelda*, *Halo 2*, *Metroid Prime 2*, *Half-Life 2*...' Sorry, but when the self-proclaimed 'future of electronic entertainment' has its annual E3 feature include what amounts to two thirds sequels, I start to worry.

I start to worry that next-gen hardware will exist solely for developers to retread old ground, just like the film industry ('In glorious Technicolor, Dolby surround and remastered SFX'). I start to worry that the wonderful niche of our niche, handheld gaming, will become the equivalent of the videogame epitaph 'play it, trade it, play it again eight years later... only smaller and slower'. I start to worry that a 'do it right, or do it right in the sequel' mentality will be adopted by many. OK, it's been going on for years, but has it ever been so prolific?

I'll admit it, I'm as guilty as the next man. Today I picked up *Driver 3* for the Xbox. Perhaps it was some vain attempt to relive the experience of the original some five years ago, or maybe to relive the experience of skipping lectures to play it. Already I regret doing so: the poor, unconfigurable, control system, the cumbersome interface (third time unlucky, guys), the overly long and pointless cut-scenes, the (so far, it seems) complete lack of progression in gameplay. The inclusion (*still*) of the utterly pointless film director mode. The original wasn't amazing, yet here I am playing another sequel. Fool me thrice, shame on me? Perhaps I should have read the **Edge** review first.
Lee Johnson

We were totally aware of the sequel-driven nature of issue 139's E3 coverage, but if the future of electronic entertainment right now consists of the likes of another *Half-Life* and a new *Zelda*, then that is simply the future of electronic entertainment right now. Having said that, surely there are only so many times gamers will want to run Link through dungeons whose puzzles are beginning to feel a touch overfamiliar. No doubt we shall see.

First of all, thank you for the excellent magazine that *Retro* was. I'm talking about the yellow issue (the only one to reach Norway, methinks). I *still* have it by my bed.

Now, as you may know, there's now a monthly retrogaming magazine called *Retro Gamer* which is utter horseshit. I picked up the first issue, read it, then threw it in the nearest garbage can (which I regret since it just went for 80 bucks on Ebay).

When will you realise that releasing a monthly retro magazine means selling loads of copies? We are a gazillion starving retrogamers out here!

Please, retrogaming deserves better than *Retro Gamer*! Make *Retro* a monthly publication!
Jarle Berntsen

Glad you liked it. We don't currently have any plans to produce any more issues of *Retro*, although that may change in the future. Watch this space.

As I read E139's letters page, I was dismayed with one of your readers' implication that those of us who appreciate the female form are both immoral and stupid. Mr Valjalo is quite within his rights not to enjoy looking at pictures of scantily clad girls. He is not, however, within his rights to insult those of us who do. It is fortunate – as a lifelong gamer – that I have become accustomed to other people's ignorant attitudes.
Leo Tan

I start to worry that the next-gen hardware will exist solely for developers to retread old ground, just like the film industry ('In glorious Technicolor, Dolby surround and remastered SFX')

Next month




E



SEPTEMBER 2004
£4.00
future publishing
Media with passion
9 771350 159038
09
gamesradar.com